

THE SACRED IN LITERATURE AND ARTS

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Abstract

The dimension of the sacred in contemporary literature and arts is a challenge which has managed to captivate us to such an extent that we have decided to analyze it systematically, starting from the book of Adrian Stoleriu. As far as the literary part is concerned, we have chosen the author of the first Romanian catechetical realistic novel, Professor Cornel Constantin Ciomâzga, with his first two books, “Lucrarea” (“The Work”) and the one we have translated, “Se întorc morții acasă” (“The Dead Are Coming Back Home”). Regarding the part related to arts, we have identified the motif of the sacred in works of art that belong to different artistic movements, and we will also refer to the vision of the contemporary group “Prologue”, thus offering an interdisciplinary approach of the topic.

Keywords: narrative structure, spirituality, perception, technique, representation.

1. Introduction

Starting from the conception of the sacred as it is seen in the very well-written book *The Visual Representation of the Sacred* of Adrian Stoleriu, this article represents our endeavor of synthesizing knowledge from the field of arts, literature, art criticism, history of religions, underlining the fact that the sacred is a permanent presence in our lives, we only need the proper perspective, knowledge and feeling in order to perceive it in its depth.

2. The Sacred

First of all, we consider essential to define the term “sacred”. In this respect, Adrian Stoleriu offers a broad perspective on the Romanian, English and French definitions of the term, also bringing forward the perspective of the German theologian and philosopher Rudolf Otto and the Romanian historian of religions Mircea Eliade.

It is underlined the fact that not even a large bibliography can offer a complete perspective on the complex meaning of the sacred. “Language is constrained to suggest only what go beyond the natural experience of the human being, through terms which have been borrowed by the human being”, according to Mircea Eliade, in *The Sacred and the Profane*¹. Consequently, focusing our attention on the Romanian-French-English perspective on the concept, “the nowadays Romanian term of *sacred* has its origin in the Latin *sacer*, meaning what is saint, solemn, having a religious character, inspiring feeling of veneration and ascension. Similarly, in French, the meanings of the notion of sacred impose an absolute respect, referring

¹ Mircea Eliade, *Sacral și profanul [The Sacred and the Profane]*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 1992, p.12.

to <what belongs to a separate field, forbidden and inviolable>², thus opposing to the profane, which is the “object of a feeling of religious reverence”³. As far as English is concerned, the English language brings similar meanings to this notion, referring to everything that is respected, consecrated, specific to divinity, “put aside” or dedicated to religious purposes⁴.

Defining the sacred is a fundamental category, *sui generis*, of the religious field, being attributed to Rudolf Otto who, in 1917, underlined the meaning of this notion through the experience of the *numinous*⁵, a term which cannot be perceived by rational perception, but which is also attributed to it: “mysterium tremendum”⁶. The notion of the *numinous* involves at least the following first two sentimental reactions:

- deep fear (*tremendum*), understood as “the holy anger of God that the Bible promotes and Christian preaching”⁷
- fascination (*fascinans*), containing the suggestion of the attraction of *the numinous*
- the element of absolute power (*majestas*)
- the element of energy (*energicum*)
- the element of the colossal (*augustus*).

From this point of view, the experience of the *numinous* is the one which gives the human being “the feeling of the phase of creature”⁸, a feeling which is similar to the feeling of fear in front of a superior force, thus underlining the insignificant status of the individual compared to “the totally different one” from the German expression “das ganz Andere”.

According to Otto, the historical appearance of the category of sacred is due to some elements that Otto calls *weird*, just like the concepts of purity and impurity are, the cult of dead, the cult of spirits, magical practices, stories, myths and legends, the elements of nature, ancient practices and beliefs (fetishism, totemism, the cult of plants and animals, demonism and polydemonism), in which one can find the common feature – *the numinous*.

One of the most complex definitions of the sacred has been provided by Mircea Eliade, who stated that *hierophany* is the main modality of knowing the sacred. The essence of his vision is represented by *homo religious* who has an inborn, natural tendency of discovering the divine world. The ability of transcending is the one which separates the sacred from the profane, but the separation is not a stable one and the space between these spiritual entities can be covered both through hierophany and desacralization. Based on the perspective of Mircea Eliade, the religious human being expresses one’s desire and necessity of “living in the sacred”⁹, because “only this type of world participates at the being, thus it truly exists”¹⁰.

Having Mircea Eliade’s perspective as a starting point, from our point of view, the vision regarding the condition of the sacred inside the contemporary human being is very well represented by the schema proposed by Adrian Stoleriu, called “A personal proposal meant to

² ***, *Le Nouveau Petit Robert de la langue française*, Nouvelle edition millésime 2007, Dictionnaires Le Robert, Paris, 2007, p.2289. We also attach the original in French: “Qui appartient à un domaine séparé, interdit et inviolable (par oppos. à ce qui est profane) et fait l’objet d’un sentiment de reverence religieuse.”

³ *Ibidem*, p.2289.

⁴ ***, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol.IX, The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1961, p.16.

⁵ Rudolf Otto, *Sacral [The Sacred]*, Dacia Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 2002, p.144.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p.18.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p.168.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p.16.

⁹ Mircea Eliade, *Sacral și profanul*, Editura Humanitas, Bucharest, 1992, p.28.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p.62.

underline the place of the human being in the universe”¹¹. Ever since the human being has appeared on this planet, there have been a number of questions that have tormented the individual who tried to find answers to various questions related to spirituality. Given the nowadays context, it has become more and more difficult for the human being marked by the quest for material stability to find the right balance in life, it has always been and there will always be a “fight” between *Homo Religious* and *Homo A-religiosus*, the individual is at the interference of the spheres of the sacred with the one of the profane.

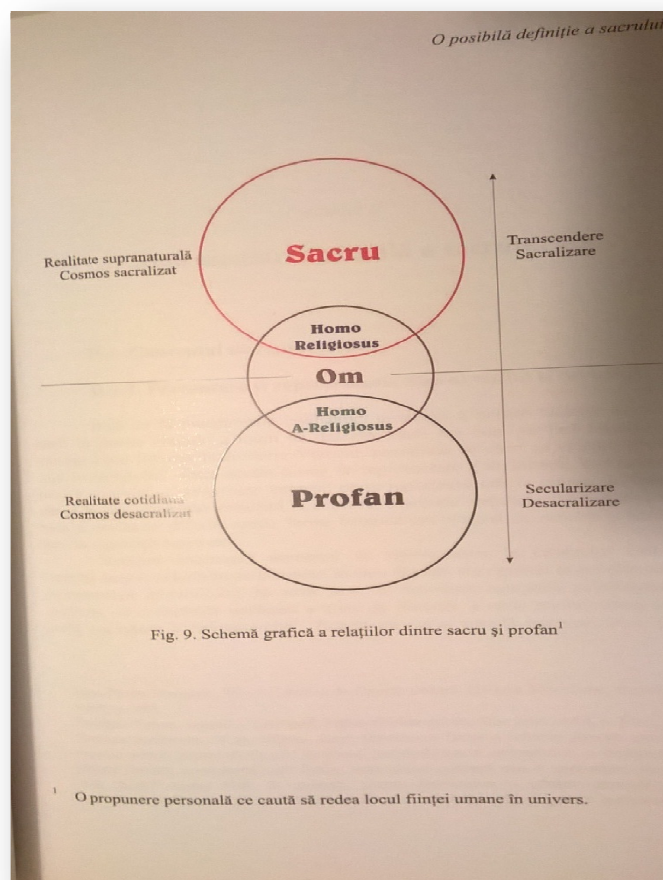


Figure 1: Adrian Stoleriu,
*O propunere personală ce caută să redea locul ființei umane în univers*¹²

Secondly, what is the difference between the sacred and the profane? Between an icon and a secular representation? In this respect, Durkheim makes the distinction between the sacred and the profane, regarding them as “separate genres, two completely distinct worlds”¹³. He noticed that the sacred world is superior to the profane one, he clearly separates the two. Despite

¹¹ Adrian Stoleriu, *Reprezentarea vizuală a sacralului* [The Visual Representation of the Sacred], Institutul European Publishing House, 2013, p.73.

¹² *Ibidem*, p.73.

¹³ Julien Ries, *Sacral în istoria religioasă a omenirii*

the reproaches he received regarding reductionism and sociologism¹⁴, Durkheim does not restrict the space of the sacred only to the field of religion, but he also integrates the social, because there are religions, such as Buddhism or Jainism, in which the sacred does not manifest itself through the presence of divinity, as it happens in Christianity. Furthermore, we appreciate the synthetic personal vision on the topic of the history of arts of the French philosopher Régis Debray, who stated that “to represent means to make the absent present”¹⁵. Consequently, the presence of so many works of art simply requires a clear delineation between the creations of sacred art, whose purpose is to serve the religious cult and autonomous, secular, laic representations whose purpose is only aesthetic.

From our point of view, the most significant chapter of the book *The Visual Representation of The Sacred* is I.3 Creația artistică înțeleasă ca experiență religioasă [The Artistic Creation Understood as a religious experience], for it explains the elements of cohesion which exist between art and the sacred and “it motivates the entire theoretical endeavor of the present paper, finding its practical correspondences in the visual representations of the sacred, in those artistic-religious manifestations which constitute real expressions of cataphatic¹⁶ and apophatic¹⁷ perception, knowledge about divinity. Adrian Stoleriu also mentions the first three primary forces of manifestation of the sacred – *the archetype, the myth and the symbol*, seen as “the ways in which the human being can become detached from profane reality, searching for the absolute truths of supernatural Reality”¹⁸.

3. The Sacred in Literature

Referring now to the manifestation of the sacred in literature, we have chosen the first catechetical Romanian realist novels written by Cornel Constantin Ciomâzgă, *Lucrarea -2004 (The Work)* and *Se întorc morții acasă -2014 (The Dead are Coming Back Home)*. In *The Work*, there is a fragment which underlines the steps of spiritual transformation one should make in order to get closer to God, the search for the sacred: “By praying, we ascend to God. And when we do manage to get to Him, says a holy father, we become as big as God, for when He descends to us – He becomes small, as we are. Consequently, the prayer is a hidden ascension done in ten steps: seven towards the sky and three in the sky.”¹⁹

¹⁴ Gilles Ferreol, *Preface to Émile Durkheim, Formele elementare ale vieții religioase [The Elementary Forms of Religious Life]*, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 1995, p.10.

¹⁵ Régis Debray, *Viața și moartea imaginii: o istorie a privirii în Occident [The Life and Death of the Image: A History of the Look in the West]*, Institutul European Publishing House, Iași, 2011, p.38.

¹⁶ According to DEX online, “cataphatism = way of knowing God through affirmation. He can be known after the way of knowing the realities of the created (seen) world, seen as His symbol, a world which has His features, stating what God is, not what He is not – from the Greek *katafasis*.” Source: <https://dexonline.ro/lexem/catafatism/161399>, last seen on 14/12/2016, my translation.

¹⁷ According to <https://ro.orthodoxwiki.org/Apofatism>, “apophatic theology = also known as negative theology – is a type of theology which tries to describe God through negation, to talk about God only in absolutely sure, certain terms and to avoid what cannot be said. In Orthodox Christianity, apophatic theology is based on the supposition that the essence of God is ineffable or it cannot be known and on the recognition of the incapacity of the human language to describe God. The apophatic tradition from Orthodoxy is often balanced by a cataphatic theology — or positive theology — and the belief in embodiment, through which God revealed Himself in the person of Jesus Christ”. Last seen on 14/12/2016, my translation.

¹⁸ Adrian Stoleriu, *op.cit.*, p.31, my translation.

¹⁹ Cornel Constantin Ciomâzgă, *Lucrarea [The Work]*, “Cartea actuală 3C” Publishing House, Bucharest, 2004, pp.113-117. Original fragment: “Prin rugăciune, ne înălțăm la Dumnezeu. Și când reușim să ne ridicăm, spune un

Therefore, in order to be able to get to the sky, the seven mentioned steps are:

1. the prayer done with the tongue (of mouth and voice), considered the lowest phase, that no one can pass over.
2. the prayer of the mind, also called “flying with one wing” by the Holy Fathers.
3. the prayer of the heart, which is more powerful, for it is the union of mind and heart
4. the seeing prayer, specific to those who can see with the spirit, even at kilometers away.
5. the prayer which moves the self, characterized by periods of divine revelations.
6. the prayer in ecstasy or in wonder, when everything that is earthly no longer has value.
7. the contemplative prayer, specific to the Saint Apostle Paul.

If all the above-mentioned phases of praying receive detailed attention in the book, the three steps in the sky are only mentioned: the prayer with the saints, the prayer with the angels and the face-to-face prayer with God.

In *Se întorc morții acasă*, [*The Dead Are Coming Back Home*], the literary dimension of the sacred is represented by the words related to the beauty of love, seen as a quest for God, we can make connections with the supreme love underlined by the Bible, in the First Letter to the Corinthians of Saint Apostle Paul, Chapter 13: “Love as state in itself, as a characteristic of the soul, cannot be described, but with great difficulty, one can establish an adequate definition. But, according to the words of the Holy Fathers, we can reveal its conditions and manifestations, step by step deciphering its delicate conditions among which, as a core, it is revealed the one of love for your enemies”²⁰.

4. The Sacred in Contemporary Works of Art

As far as sacred symbols in contemporary works of art are concerned, we will focus our attention on an article that appeared in *Anastasis. Research in Medieval Culture and Art*, called “Sacred Symbols in Dimitrie Gavrilean’s Paintings”²¹. To begin with, Dimitrie Gavrilean (1942-2012) was a contemporary painter who was preoccupied by the Romanian fundamental myths, ancestral myths and recently Christianized ones. According to Emilian Adrian Gavrileanu, “his vision is specific to the Romanian Christianity and the Byzantine iconography. The language of Gavrilean’s paintings is one of symbols, by excellence”²². Furthermore, if we analyze the entire work of the master Gavrilean reflects his deep attachment towards the principles of Christian iconography of Byzantine tradition “both in terms of expressive-plastic means of representation (spaciousness, composition, shape, line, rhythm, chromatics, light) and in terms of the concept (the fusion sky-earth, the time-myth and the time-history, symbols). In this respect, it is not by chance the fact that Dimitrie Gavrilean was also a famous church painter”²³.

sfânt părinte, ne facem mari cât Dumnezeu, pentru că atunci când El se pogoară la noi – se face mic, precum suntem. Ruga este, așadar, o tainică urcare ce se face în zece trepte: șapte până la cer și trei în cer.”

²⁰ <http://cornelconstantinciomazga.ro/se-intorc-mortii-acasa/despre-carte/asa-incepe-arta-de-a-trai/>

²¹ Emilian Adrian Gavrileanu, “Sacred Symbols in Dimitrie Gavrilean’s Paintings”, from *Anastasis. Research in Medieval Culture and Art*, Volume III, No.1 / May 2016, The Sign and the Sacred, Artes Publishing House, 2016, pp.159-178.

²² *Ibidem*, p.159.

²³ *Ibidem*, p.160.

One of his works of art that has caught our attention is “Cel Vechi de zile” [The Ageless One], which is an example of sacred art marked by the presence of angels. As we all know, angels are the ones who establish a connection between God and the world, their significant element of representation is represented by the wings, a symbol of transcendence and immateriality, their spiritual nature.



Figure 2. Dimitrie Gavrilean, *Cel Vechi de zile* [The Ageless One]²⁴

In a period of time when desacralization and the crazy quest for hedonism have become leitmotifs not only for art, but also for our entire existence, there are still people who create art, underlining the humble sight and full of happiness specific to the Orthodox Christianity, transposed on canvas by the Group “Prolog” [Prologue], which appeared in 1985, being composed of Paul Gherasim, Constantin Flondor, Mihail Sârbuleasa, Ion Grigorescu, Horea Paștina, Cristian Paraschiv. We have found pieces of information about Paul Gherasim, Constantin Flondor and Ion Grigorescu in Vasile Florea’s album *Arta românească modernă și contemporană* [Romanian Modern and Contemporary Art], volume II.

Therefore, in 1957, on the occasion of celebrating 50 years from the uprising from 1907, this tendency of reviving medieval traditions had a concrete materialization in a series of

²⁴ ***, *ANASTASIS. Research in Medieval Culture and Art*, Vol. III, No.1 – May 2016, Artes Publishing House, 2016, p.163.

compositions, some of them being frescos. The triptych created by A. Almășanu, C. Crăciun and P. Gherasim is considered representative in this respect.²⁵

Starting from the dichotomy between reason and feeling, between the predominance of the rational element in a work of art, and in another one – of the complex painting of our actual art, many artists simply cannot be placed in one of the sides of this rigid classification. There are even cases, such as the one of Paul Gherasim (born in 1925), when the evolution or transition from figurative painting which is mostly lyric to geometric abstractionism is obvious. Vasile Florea mentions that “the intimate mechanisms of the painter are not known, but there is something from the system of vaulting specific to Romanian monastic buildings, something from the medieval *ripide*²⁶ which makes us suppose that the aspiration towards order and purity of this artist who needs to quench his thirst for ideal finds a space of serenity in national art”²⁷.

Another painter who is representative for the Group “Prolog” [Prologue] is Constantin Flondor-Străinu (born in 1936), being mentioned among the ones who have tendencies towards the conceptualization of art, in the fields of optical and kinetical art. He is the one who used grooved glass, obtained through the movement of a ruler, thus obtaining changing images. Moreover, Vasile Florea also mentions that Constantin Flondor was the one who organized an artistic group in 1966, called “Sigma 1”, together with Ștefan Bertalan and with other artists from Timișoara, the main objective of this group was this: based on a reduced number of signs combined in supersigns, they wanted to create an open universe of communication, created especially for the ambiental urban space. Furthermore, the existence of this group proves the fact that Romanian art has been spread on the territory of our country in its most diverse forms, including the prospective-experimental ones²⁸.

In the case of Ion Grigorescu (born in 1945), Vasile Florea identified his attraction towards what is concrete, going as far as to becoming close to naturalism. The image is composed while also inserting photographs in order to obtain new, modern and shocking representations. It can also be shocking the opposite attitude of the ones who choose ephemeral and perishable art or its consumerism²⁹.

5. Conclusions

By the present article, we have tried to underline different definitions of the sacred, we have made the distinction between the sacred and the profane, even in art, we have focused our attention on the literary dimension of the sacred in *The Work* and *The Dead Are Coming Back Home*, by Cornel Constantin Ciomâzgă, we have identified contemporary works of art that are the manifestation of the divine on canvas. Our endeavor is based on the personal belief that the sacred and the profane coexist in this world and there is a permanent struggle in us, as human beings, to make the right decisions in our personal quest towards ascension.

²⁵ Vasile Florea, *Arta românească modernă și contemporană, [Romanian Modern and Contemporary Art]*, Meridiane Publishing House, Bucharest, 1982, p. 287.

²⁶ *Ripidă* = Romanian term specific to the Orthodox Church, an object made of metal or wood, having the form of palate, adorned with the image of a seraph or with Biblical scenes and used during ceremonies, according to <https://dexonline.ro/definitie/ripid%C4%83>, last seen on 14/12/2016, my translation.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 320.

²⁸ Idem, pp.353-354.

²⁹ Idem, p.352.

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