THE VALUES OF ANTIQUITY IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE AND ARTS

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Abstract
Starting from the books *Critères esthétiques et jugement de gout* of Yves Michaud and *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* of Arthur Danto, the aim of the present article is to underline the influence of the values which are specific to Antiquity over modern and contemporary art and over literature which, in time, has proven to be an important pillar of the development of human society. We based our research on the contribution of ancient people to the subsequent development of different periods of artistic creation, starting from the ancient *Kalos kagathos* and underlining its connections with modern and contemporary art and also literature, in Evgheni Vodolazkin's *Laur*.
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1. Introduction

The chosen topic is a large one. Related to the essence of Antiquity, encapsulated in *Kalos kagathos* – the ideal human being who is a combination of truth, beauty and good, Werner Jaeger brought a more nuanced perspective, mentioning "the chivalrous ideal of the complete human personality, harmonious in mind and body, foursquare in battle and speech, song and action"[1]. Concerning the re-establishment of values in art, an essential role was played by the research of written sources during the Italian Renaissance, this study was carried out by Greek and Latin writers. At the beginning of Quattrocento, Lorenzon Ghiberti, the sculpture of the Baptistery Doors from Florence, provided he first commented, Italian version, of the books about art from *Naturalis Historia* of Plinius the Elder, containing many errors specific to the beginning of humanistic studies. Later, Lucian Pausanias, Strabo, Filostrat were translated and commented, once progress was made regarding the study of ancient texts, between the 15th -18th centuries.

From our point of view, the re-establishment of the values specific to ancient texts took place later on, between the 19th -20th centuries, also involving literature, arts, because the part connected to the philological critique of texts is based on remarkable archeological discoveries and on the progress regarding the refinement of the scientific methods of investigation of former civilizations.

2. The development of arts

Starting from the question "What exactly can be seen as having artistic value nowadays?", and also the nature of artistic experience which can only be subjective, we consider that the analysis should start from the observations of nowadays art critics and also from the individual perception of art. In modern times, Winckelmann's perspective concerning neoclassicism is changed.

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[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kalos_kagathos

Moreover, there have been carried out several research activities which led to the identification of several phases of development concerning ancient art:

a. The primitive period – regarded as a time of abstraction and geometrization.

b. The archaic period – characterized by the study of nature which became widespread.

c. The classic period – a specific severe style is noticeable and the styles of the great artists of the 4th century B.C. (Scopas, Praxiteles and Lisip – the ones that were the predecessors and initiators of Hellenistic styles). During this time, a specific balance between concept and form had been achieved, what dominated was the objectivism marked by civic and religious elements.

d. The Hellenistic period – in this respect, the subjective style expands and form triumphs. The following have been identified: the baroque of the sculptors from the schools of Pergam, Rhodos and Samothraki, Alexandrine rococo, sculpture and painting, the landscape. Moreover, new procedures appeared, such as three dimensionality in painting, chiaroscuro, the coloristic model, raccourci, the impressionist technique. The end of the Hellenistic era brought an intellectualist reactivity which was characterized by a specific pragmatic and positivist spirit. During the time of the empire, both aulic and provincial art become oriented towards expressionist formulae, there is a return towards frontality and abstractization. Regarding the theoretical reflexion over figurative arts, we underline the fact that Antiquiy has never known a history of arts connected to aesthetic criteria which can be compared to modern ones, nor art critique having a modern meaning.

Thus, we have solid proofs, written works about arts in the 5th century: Democrit 's *About colours* and the writing of Euphranor, in the first half of the 4th century B.C.. In this period, there are preoccupations for research over art inside the systematization of theory made by the philosophers of the Academy and Highschool. In the Hellenistic period, inside the great libraries from Alexandria and Pergam, erudite studies have been launched in the field of sculpture, painting, architecture, the biographies of artists are written, works are attributed to artists, schools and filiations are created, chronologies are established, finally, the phenomenon of arts is commented theoretically and critically in the context of the same preoccupations for encyclopedic knowledge, having connections with natural sciences, philology, rhetorics, philosophy, mathematics, astronomy. This erudition current is normally continued during the Roman time, when anthologies are created, gathering the material gathered by the Hellenistic science.

In the attempt of identifying art works and also literary creations, we have introduced concepts of rhetoric, style and expression, specific to the Ancient world. Among these three concepts, we consider that the term of "expression" is the most suitable one for art; we insist on its importance, because the works of art which have a topic are not limited to their own representation, but they also succeed in transmitting something about it. So, all literary and art works are connected to expression and especially to expressiveness.

And still, if we were to make a list of the values and virtues of the ancient human being and another one with the virtues and values of the nowadays individual, we could easily notice there is no total overlapping of the two lists, but a similarity of content, doubled by the congruence between different corresponding forms. In other words, both Antiquity and recent humanity state and bring proofs about the perennity of fundamental human values.

First of all, even if the values of Antiquity and of modernity and postmodernity are the same, their expression is different, and the consignments about Antiquity can be wrongly understood and

ideologically used. For example, we mention here the fact that Plato's philosophy about the ideal organization of the citadel was wrongly interpreted and used by the communist ideology.

Secondly, Antiquity is not something unitary: it has not been the same in all places; even in the same geographical area, the lifestyle of ancient people does not seem to have been the same in all periods. There have been cases in which ancient people deplored the morals of their contemporaries, comparing them with long-forgotten times?

It is obvious that the idealization and/or the misinterpretation of ancient values are possible and even probable in the case of a superficial evaluation of ancient consignments. For someone who tries to judge things from a correct perspective which is that of ancient people, it won't be hard to notice that the fundamental values and virtues of the ancient human being are the same for the recent man. Honesty, balance, wisdom, concession, altruism – and many other virtues have never ceased to be virtues.

Starting from the famous words of Protagoras, "The human being is the measure of all things", we underline the idea that ancient people valued the ensemble good-truth-beauty, reflected also in what they painted and sculpted. For example, the Egyptian works in which characters are represented from the perspective of perfect frontality (the eyes, the position of the body, of the hands) are, in fact, the reflection of the art of credibility, it is the perspective of the mind which serves the idea of truth.

Coming back to the idea of "aesthetic criterion" which can be applied to the art of all ages, we consider that the statement of Wittgenstein from *Leçons et conversations sur l'esthétique, la psychologie et la croyance religieuse* is valid:

"Afin d'y voir clair en ce qui concerne les mots esthétiques, vous avez à decrier des façons de vivre. Nous pensons que nous avons à parler de jugements esthétiques tells que "ceci est beau", mais nous découvrons que si nous avons à parler de jugements esthétiques, nous ne trouvons pas du tout ces mots-là, mais un mot qui est employé à peu près comme un geste et qui accompagne une activité compliquée. Le jugement est un geste concomitant d'une vaste structure d'actions qui ne sont pas exprimées par un jugement singulier."[2]

In his own manner, talking in 1972 about an act of "dés-esthéticisation de l'art", Rosenberg launched the question: how can we judge contemporary art if there aren't any valid aesthetic criteria?[3]

In this respect, we totally agree with Yves Michaud, who mentioned in *Critères esthètiques et jugement de gout*: "Le critère est donc aussi ce qui permet de porter un jugement d'appréciation: en function du critère, on prend ou on laisse, on admet ou on écarte. L'idée de valorization et d'appreciation este bien présente mais elle est indissociable de l'opération de choisir, de retenir ou de laisser. Valoir, c'est être retenu".[4]

3. The literary approach

Modern aesthetics, given the fact that its study object is the beautiful, has established some borders between the beautiful and other values. Christianity admits that there are specific theoretical distinctions, but it claims that all these values (the good, the truth and the beautiful) have the same source, that is God.

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[2] L. Wittgenstein, *Leçons et conversations sur l'esthétique, la psychologie et la croyance religieuse*, I, pag.35.

[3] Harold Rosenberg, *The De-definition of Art*, New York, Horizon Press, 1972, trad.franç. *La dédéfinition de l'art*, Nîmes, Éd. Jacqueline Chambon, coll. Rayon Art, 1992.

[4] Michaud, Yves, *Critères esthétiques et jugement de gout*, Éditions Jacqueline Chambon, Nîmes, 1999.

We will continue our analysis with the identification of the ancient *Kalos kagathos* in a contemporary literary creation, *Laur* by Evgheni Vodolazkin. Seen as a masterpiece of nowadays literature, the bestseller Laur won several awards, such as The Prize Bolşaia Kniga and The Prize of Readers, in 2013. Aferwards, in the same year, it received The Prize Iasnaia Poliana (Lev Tolstoy), afterwards it was translated in more than twenty countries.

Being placed in the 15th century, in Russia, *Laur* is the Bildungsnovel of Arseni, who is a healer, a fool-for-Christ, a pilgrim and a monk, he passes from one phase to another during the entire book which contains four individualized chapters which are suggestively called "The Book of Knowledge", "The Book of Giving Up", "The Book of the Road" and "The Book of Tranquility"[5].

Therefore, these four stages through which Laur passes have in common the quest for God, Who represents the Way, the Truth and Life, thus encapsulating the ancient *Kalos kagathos*. Moreover, each of these phases is connected to having a new name, this fact can also be associated with the moment when monks leave their former earthly life and dedicate their existence to God, also changing their names, as a sign of "rebirth" in a new existence. The eloquent fragment is the following: "Laur is a good name, because the plant which is now your homonym is medicinal. Being always green, it symbolizes eternal life.

No longer do I feel the unity of my life, said Laur. I was Arseni, Ustin, Ambrozie, and now, look, I have become Laur. My life has been lived by four people who don't look alike, who have different bodies and different names. What do we have in common, the blonde child from Rukina village and I? Memory? The more I live, the more it seems that my memories are inventions. I have ceased to believe in them, and this is why they can't connect me with the one that I was in different periods. Life looks very much like a mosaic and it opens up in pieces. (…) But even in the mosaic of life, there is what unites all its components: the aspiration towards Him. In Him, they all become one, again"[6].

Furthermore, if we analyze the entire novel, there are numerous moments when Arseni, with God's help, actually works miracles, at pages 157, 158, 160, 161, 294, to mention only a few of them. Moreover, we found fragments which remind us of Surrealism, there are undeniable connections with the world of art: when Arseni cured a woman of a terrible tooth ache, he did something almost hilarious, underlined in the fragment "He put his hand in his mouth, he pulled the wisdom tooth from the gum and handed it to the new comers. They understood that this was the answer of the healer to their request. They took the wisdom tooth to the wife, she put it inside her mouth and the pain went away"[7].

Reminding us of the movie "Andrei Rublev" of Tarkovsky and also by the novel *The Name of the Rose* of Umberto Eco, *Laur* was written in a refined simple style, normally passing from reality to fantasy, from what is mundane to what is holy, the humour is subtle and full of sensibility in this "non-historical novel", as the author himself calls it.

With simple, but powerful words, Vodolazkin marks the spiritual transition from a time when Russia truly felt the need of divinity and contemporary times:

"There are things about which it is easier to speak in the context of old Russia. About God, for example. In my opinion, the connections with him were more direct a long time ago. More than this, they simply existed. Now, the nature of these connections has become a preoccupation only for

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[5] Evgheni Vodolazkin, *Laur*, *A nonhistorical novel,* Translation from Russian and notes by Adriana Liciu, "Humanitas Fiction" Publishing House, Bucharest, 2014, page 325, my translation.
[6] Evgheni Vodolazkin, *Laur*, page 296, my translation.
[7] Idem 2, page 156, my translation.

very few people, and this troubles me. Have we found out, from the Middle Ages onwards, a completely new thing, which allows us to relax?"[8]

As far as the narrative style is concerned, there are moments when the narration seems to flow from the perspective of Laur (1st person narrative), there are also situations in which we can speak about the 3rd person narrative. In the IIIrd book of *The Republic,* Plato makes the difference between two narrative modes: the author narrates from a personal perspective, without making us believe that one speaks about the third person – this fact is known as *diegesis*, the author gives us the illusion that one is not the one who is speaking, but there is another person; in this case, Plato was referring to the priest of Apollo. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle transforms "pure history" and direct representation in two varieties of mimesis, taken over by the Anglo-Saxon narrative structure as the opposition between *showing* vs. *telling*. Being in favour of descriptive poetics, Gérard Genette and Wayne Booth underline the fact that *showing*, as a kind of *imitation* or narrative representation is, in fact, a total illusion: in contrast with dramatic representation, no story can fully illustrate the idea of "show" or "imitate". Thus, a story can offer the illusion of mimesis, because it was created using language and "language has a specific meaning, without imitating".

In *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Danto brings forward the following idea: "Plato did not state in no uncertain terms that art is mimesis; he rather supported the idea that mimetic art is harmful. (…) First of all, mimetic art is placed at a significant distance from reality, Plato understood this concept as what he called *forms.* (…)And who, Plato asks, would choose the appearance of the thing instead of the thing itself? (…) We could summarize Plato's idea in a few words: the ones who are capable *create* things; those who are incapable *imitate* them"[9].

4. Conclusions
In a nutshell, we do believe that there are undoubtful connections between the ancient *Kalos kagathos* and modern and contemporary art and literature; the novel *Laur* is a powerful Russian writing, representing an invitation for the readers to introspection, in search for higher values for one's soul. To conclude, we believe the fact that both Antiquity and nowadays humanity state and offer proofs regarding the perennity of fundamental human values.

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[8] http://www.humanitas.ro/humanitas-fiction/laur
[9] Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of Commonplace*, p.29-30, my translation.