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THE SENSE OF VALUE IN A DESACRALIZED WORLD

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Review of Nicolae Râmbu, *The Value of Sense and the Sense of Value* (*Valoarea sentimentului și sentimentul valorii*), (Cluj-Napoca, Grinta Press, 2010), 172 pages

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A lot has been written about the modern contemporary world as desacralized.¹ Mircea Eliade, for instance, looks at this phenomenon as a form of camouflaging the sacred with the profane. However, his view is optimistic in comparison with Nietzsche's apocalyptic prophecies which stated that "God has died." The interpretation offered by the Romanian historian of religions can save not just the images and representations of modernity, but also a series of ideal-patterns of world literature.² All the more as they do not embody in a visible manner virtues and senses that we could associate with the sacred. Rather, they are under the stigma, the carnivalesque, the negative. Beyond their literary careers, characters like Don Quixote, Casanova, Werther, Wilhelm Meister, carry sin within. For our contemporaries, madness, suicide, unfaithfulness, nonconformism are still associated with sin and the evil. There is absolutely no way in which we could see as role models or admire persons who share such values and senses. Nevertheless, a closer reading of the characters mentioned may reveal unexpected aspects of their personality. We can practically discover that characters who are apparently so profane may conceal deep senses.

The study *The Value of Sense and the Sense of Value* signed by Nicolae Râmbu aims at uncovering the hidden face of the characters, foregrounding a classic theme of an undeniable relevance for our present: the relation between sense and value. Without using the rhetoric of abstract philosophical discourse which would place it in the sphere of cold idea, the book of the philosopher from the City of Iassy gives us the chance of participating together with the author in building and discovering the deep meanings of value and sense. Just like the sacred hidden in the profane, they can be found in the most unexpected places. Jesus Christ holds a special place in the whole economy of the study. His presence makes a difference (at least at the level of Christian representations) from the other characters who suffer all sorts of sins. A possible connection between Jesus Christ, Don Quixote, Casanova, Werther, Wilhelm Meister could be the very fact that each is in his own way a "scapegoat" in the manner in which Rene Girard explained it. Taking the sins of the whole world on his shoulders, each character made possible the discovery of the value of sense and of the sense of value. After all, these characters are ideal-patterns showing that virtually any stone may hide a gem. Thus, if Don Quixote is the idealist, Casanova the adventurous seducer, Werther the suicidal hero, Wilhelm Meister the apprentice, Jesus Christ will be, in the audacious and subtle view of the author, the idiot in the sense given by Dostoevski in the novel of the same title. Apparently paradoxically, these human types revealed by an author inspired by the muse of philosophy, share the great quality of saving - each in his own way, less accepted by the world inhabited by the characters and by our world too - values and senses which have long become part and parcel of social fashions and stereotypes, of current contexts and ideologies.

Each character in his own way expresses to an absolute degree an attachment to values and senses which become the axis or centre of their existence.

For example, as Nicolae Râmbu argues, *Don Quixote* manages to convert values into an ideal due to faith and strong feelings. Thus, Cervantes' character captures the essence of existence and truth. However, his fate is far from stirring our envy: like the one who manages to distinguish the *world of ideas* from the *world of shadows* in Plato's cave, Don Quixote lives the drama of being misunderstood, of always being the target of mockery. "Basically, anyone who has truly believed in values and who has unflinchingly committed oneself to them has been a Sad Figure."³ The character's predicament changes dramatically when everything is related to the self. The self becomes a refraction of the ideal and of the beauty of ideas. Youth, vitality, imagination, courage are, from this perspective, the consequences of the values he shares. Paraphrasing N. Steinhardt,⁴ we may say that Don Quixote miraculously *gains* virtues and senses *by giving himself away*. More specifically, he goes beyond the common sense which owes so much to the senses and takes shadows for truths. "Human sense does not merely reflect reality, but shapes it according to its ideas and ideals. The world is good or evil, beautiful or ugly, meaningless or meaningful as it is to the one who reshapes it starting from the deceiving data offered by the senses."⁵ That this is indeed the case is demonstrated by the scene of the character's recovery and normality regain. This equals the death of values and absence of meaning in life. The professor keenly remarks that the character of Don Quixote is the perfect epitome of an axiological dilemma which has the individual tugged between *idealism* and *wisdom*. However, starting from Hegel's phenomenology and the subtleties of Nietzsche's philosophy, Nicolae Râmbu reinterprets the figure of the wise man in Arthur Schopenhauer's aphorisms and saves the Quixotic idealism adding it a touch of finality.

Casanova belongs to the same category of exceptional characters who breach the everyday patterns of normality, constantly practising another philosophy of life. "Casanova's philosophy is an ongoing practice of happiness."⁶ The author turns this philosophy into an exceptional axiological equation: "happiness is a *value - purpose*, while pleasure is a *value means*. Moreover, pleasure leads to happiness only to the extent to which it is brought to an end."⁷ This way of reflecting the world makes Casanova live his *life as a game*. In the author's view, the playfulness of this existence is not in the least indicative of an absence of principles, values and senses. As a matter of fact, what this character epitomizes is an option for the possibility of living with "maximum voluptuousness any satisfaction that destiny has in store for him."⁸ Discovering happiness in and through passion, Casanova finds the essence of human nature, and in particular the essence of feminine nature. Practising happiness, he manages to turn feelings and values into ideas to which human nature will

always respond. This is exactly the reason why he has become the seducer *par excellence*. Living *life as a game* and *philosophy as adventure*, the character and his work may stir axiological dilemmas at some point. The discourse about suicide captures this very aspect. The one who practises *happiness* with maximum voluptuousness toys with the idea of *suicide* “in solitary confinement.” This may be a sign that he has indeed found happiness. It is universally acknowledged that values and feelings in absolute doses may drive one out of his minds, they may be a burden to the mortals. We argue that the idea of suicide has a rather compensatory value meant to restore the individual’s balance in the face of overwhelming happiness.

The existence of *Werther* and also of Goethe himself, this character’s author belong to the same category of axiological dilemmas explored by *The Value of Sense and the Sense of Value*. Being the embodiment of the suicider, Werther has a more or less paradoxical condition: he heals and instills the germs of disease at the same time. His birth sets the author free from the obsession with suicide. The same literary character will generate Werthmania, a wave of suicides taking the youngster’s sufferings as a pretext.

The philosopher has all reasons to wonder how a masterpiece can save and kill at the same time. What is the essence of this conflict? The answers to this question are supported by a series of philosophical answers provided by “an expert” in the field, Emil Cioran. “Any book is delayed suicide”⁹ in Cioran’s view in the sense that turning values into an act of creation may set the individual free from the axiological dilemmas and tensions that are likely to rule over one’s existence. This is what happened in Goethe’s case. However, those who have eventually committed suicide carrying the great author’s masterpiece with them did not have the capacity to externalize the conflict of values within into a creative act. Nicolae Râmbu subtly notices that “what happens inside the soul of every individual at an elementary level becomes disproportionately inflated in the hypersensitivity of Goethe’s character. Any normal axiological consciousness (the author argues) recognizes love, friendship, loyalty, truth, etc. as positive values without any hesitation. The tragedy of it is that in the deepest recesses of the human soul the positive values cannot live but in conflict.”¹⁰ If values and senses are consubstantial with the human being, their expression is often vitiated by culture, context and external factors. Few are those who manage to show them to the world to the full. As Nicolae Râmbu so pertinently argues, they risk being considered cranks, adventurers, suiciders or idiots. Suicide as a final reply to death is perhaps the easiest answer the one living under the “tyranny of values” can give. A lot more difficult answer is the effort of creation, of idiosyncratic expression. Casanova, Don Quixote, Prince Myshkin are emblematic characters in this respect. This is why the free creative gesture may be a liberating act, which a world taking shadows for truths finds hard to accept.

Fathering another famous character (*Wilhelm Meister*), Goethe foregrounds the issues of *the values of formation*. Nicolae Râmbu proposes an interpretation of the formative years in a Hegelian key. Wilhelm's apprenticeship as captured by Goethe is actually nothing else than a metaphor of what the author of the study inspiredly calls "the art of living." In the spirit of Hegel's dialectics, the author shows that "an experience fatally pushes the self towards another, just as reason has to draw a certain conclusion out of two judgments which are the premises of an argument. (...) If you live the experience of love, then you will necessarily live the experience of deception too."¹¹ The values and tensions they breed in the human soul cannot be avoided. Only the way in which these are expressed can make a difference. Conformism and nonconformism are two distinct expressions of their manifestation in the world. In its essence, Wilhelm Meister's experience suggests, in the philosopher's opinion, that human existence lies in the space between hazard and necessity, and that humans are the only species that gets to shape their own existence. Nevertheless, the years of apprenticeship may illustrate the image of life, of formation as a long period of initiation. The stake would be self-knowledge and discovery of the final meanings of existence. Goethe's character has, from this perspective, an unlucky fate: unable to fulfill his passion, he kills it, letting himself be guided by austere and cold reason. It is hard to say whether the road of his formation was a success or a failure. We can be absolutely certain, however, that when our potential values fail to find an outlet we become commonplace, stiff, common, "we are – in Nicolae Râmbu's words – lost in what we become rather than accomplished."¹²

Jesus is the fifth hypostasis of the one who shares the ideal in an absolute way. Revising Nietzsche's text *Antichrist* and relying on Dostoevski's novel *The Idiot*, Nicolae Râmbu undertakes a subtle philosophic analysis of the nihilist philosophic discourse which places the figure of the Redeemer in the sphere of lunacy and folly. In fact, the philosopher argues, we deal with a painfully relevant image of our present times, which, in the case of the average individual, causes a dramatic reversal of values. For most of us, who are prisoners in the cave of the senses, the one who truly sees and understands is a fool and an idiot, out of one's mind. As the author has so keenly observed, this truth underpins literary masterpieces of great impact (Cervantes, Goethe, Casanova, Dostoevski are just a few examples). All these characters somehow find their accomplishment in the world through the exemplary figure of Christ the Redeemer. In a way, he is the live expression of an axiological paradox in the world: true values get the individual close to the ideal, to divinity, driving him away from the world. "Axiologically speaking, not Jesus, not Don Quixote, not Prince Myshkin or any other authentic idealist are insane, on the contrary, they stand for the sanity of the spirit, for the

normality of the axiological conscience, for the integrity of perceiving the loftiest values, while such average “idiots” as the rest [of us] are insane.”¹³

The five characters are as many topics of meditation over the way in which the world values sense and value when these are expressed as absolute values. Paraphrasing the author, we may say that each of these characters lives a double condition: they are the patients and doctors of culture at the same time. In this paradoxical axiological equation, philosophy would have, in the author’s opinion, a therapeutic role.

The book written by Nicolae Râmbu is also an invitation to a more careful look into what is readily labelled as evil, sinful, banal or common. It is very likely that authentic virtues hide behind appearances.

Notes:

¹ A complex debate about desacralization can be traced in the interviews in Cristina Gavriluță, *The Sacred and Californization of Culture. Seven Interviews about Religion and Globalization*, (Bucharest: Paideia, 2008). A relevant contribution to the debate about the dynamics of value secularization in the Romanian cultural space can be found in Mihaela Frunză, Sandu Frunză, “Ethics, Superstition and the Laicization of the Public Sphere,” *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 8, no. 23, (Summer 2009): 13-25.

² A significant perspective of Eliade’s contribution is also Mihaela Paraschivescu’s “Mircea Eliade and the Quest for Religious Meaning”, *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, Vol 9, No. 25 (2010): 59-68. An approach to the saving role of products of imagination and recollection in the process of re-sacralizing certain elements in the life of the modern individual through literature is Sandu Frunză’s “Ellie Wiesel and Nostalgia for a Lost Paradise”, *Transylvanian Review*, Vol. XVIII, No. 2, (Summer 2009): 101-105.

³ Nicolae Râmbu, *The Value of Sense and the Sense of Value (Valoarea sentimentului și sentimentul valorii)*, (Cluj-Napoca: Grinta Press, 2010), 10.

⁴ N. Steinhardt, *Giving Away You Will Gain*, (Rohia: The Monastery of Rohia Press, 2006).

⁵ Nicolae Râmbu, *The Value of Sense and the Sense of Value* (Cluj-Napoca: Grinta Press, 2010), 13.

⁶ Râmbu, 36.

⁷ Râmbu, 37.

⁸ Râmbu, 58.

⁹ Râmbu, 71.

¹⁰ Râmbu, 80.

¹¹ Nicolae Râmbu, 92. About the experience of love in the secularized context of modernity, the Romanian reader may also wish to see Aurel Codoban’s book *The Twilight of Love* (Cluj-Napoca: Idea Press, 2004).

¹² Râmbu, 103.

¹³ Râmbu, 138.