

The Baroque - an expression of ambiguity

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Abstract

Baroque is the artistic and philosophical expression that divided the spirit of Western Europe between the Renaissance and Modern Classicism. Baroque era was the proof of the crisis of Renaissance neoclassical schemes. All attempts to save the present by means of recovering a lost time ended into conflicts that led to their failure, giving way to a terrible skepticism and to a breakdown of the European consciousness, which were close to chaos.

Under an apparent eclecticism were some characteristic issues intertwined in an inseparable manner such as the discovery of womanhood, of ambiguity and ambivalence of human action, tragedy, transience adorned with glory and splendor, day-dream and night-dream imaginary, the fascination of exotic lands, mysticism and rationalism.

The Baroque will be the fruit of this world; it will be the expression of a Renaissance exhausted in the attempt to find a principle of authority in the past, giving way to uncertainty that will lead to widespread skeptical mind. For the Baroque man, the individual emancipation, as the product of the magnificent work of Renaissance, was metamorphosed into an inheritance that became nothing else than a burden. Freedom seemed to be, in this cultural trend, a major source of human decay.

All these features will be accomplished both in the Baroque philosophy and in the field of art creations, particularly those in theater, painting, sculpture, and architecture.

In the philosophical field, some great skeptics as Pierre Charron, Michel de Montaigne, Blaise Pascal, but also some fine analysts of error and doubt, as Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes, appeared. Baroque thinkers considered that doubt was the price of the rebirth of freedom that was conquered in the Renaissance. The doubt could be ended only by choice, but any such choice would be it, inevitably would mark the end, which will be the untying solution.

Keywords: *Baroque philosophy, skepticism, ambivalence, imaginary, drama, human destiny.*

The Baroque is the artistic and philosophical expression, which structures the spirit of Western Europe between Renaissance and modern Classicism. It acts as a matrix that hides under an apparent eclecticism a way of thinking and a sensibility marking the transition from one paradigm to another, from the model of European culture, mainly oriented to the past, to the model of modernity, which makes its virtues from valorizing the present and conquering the future.

The Renaissance can be considered the end of the Middle Ages, as a time that would live at full intensity the distance from the originating time of a Christian peace. The image of the Apocalypse transcends every cultural manifestation, from the paintings of Dürer, Bosch or Breugel to Savonarola's sermons, proving the fact that we've already reached a great distance from the initial point and the retrieval of it would be virtually impossible as the world risks to collapse into chaos, into an irreversible disintegration.

What are, in fact, the manifestations of the Renaissance except for an excessive nostalgia of an archetypal era? The Kabbala sees the evil in this world as the consequence of the swerve, dislodgement from the primary meaning of the sacred word¹; the alchemy hopes to ennoble a degraded and damned universe by discovering the philosopher's stone²; the Humanism discovers and exalts the antique Classicism; the Reform tends to invigorate the themes and attitudes of the first Christian communities; the Inquisition wants a *renovatio* of the universal peace, of a Golden Era, as was that of Charlemagne.

If Mannerism was the first rupture of the Renaissance spirit, the Baroque represents the proof of the crisis of Renaissance neoclassical paradigms. The attempts to save the present by the recovery of a lost time will eventually end in conflicts which will lead to their failure, making room for a terrible skepticism, for a disintegration of the European conscience bordering chaos. The Baroque will be nothing but the fruit of this world, the expression of an exhausted Renaissance due to its attempt to find a principle of authority in the past, giving in to uncertainties which will lead to a generalized skeptical spirit. Furthermore, great skeptics will appear in the domain of the philosophy, such as Pierre Charron, Michel de Montaigne, Blaise Pascal, as well as fine analysts of error and doubt, such as Francis Bacon and René Descartes.

¹ Roland Goetschel, *Kabbala*, West Publishing House, Timișoara, 1992.

² Serge Hutin, *Alchimia*, West Publishing House, Timișoara, 1992.

The etymology of the word "*Baroque*" sends us to that *barroco* of the Portuguese, which denotes an asymmetrically polished, imperfect pearl. Symbol of the femininity, bearing the mark of the Moon, the pearl is the light from deep waters that appears as a result of the wound of the shell containing it. Really valuable things, bearing the sign of a sublimated suffering, can be found only in the most hidden places. The pearl becomes a symbol of the truth produced by an alchemic labor and has to be kept hidden, kept as a secret. Only what is trivial is in full sight. In the spirit of the pearl, the Baroque being is above all a *Homo absconditus*, who prefers a moonlit night to the solar daylight. It is the era of the lunatics, of the astrologist astronomers, who inquired the clear night sky looking for radiant stars.

The theme of the allegory, of the fable, that masks the meaning of the world, comes into prominence. From Descartes³ to La Fontaine⁴ everything runs its course in the register of a fable of the world, of a parallel world, similar but not identical to ours.

The pearl makes us think to the great water distances that the seventeenth century had to manage for the first time with extremely rudimentary means. So the fabulous could be found sitting side by side with extremely accurate data. The pearl had a magic effect on all those imaginations that fed on the dream of the El Dorado. The substance of the pearl captures the Baroque in its integrality, showing both its pompous brightness and its erotic, occult, feminine, lunar, fragile inner layer that send inevitably to tragic. In the nacre mirror of the pearls the dreams of modern world from utopias to voyages on distant planets, such as those of *Cyrano de Bergerac*⁵ or *Kepler*⁶, were awakening.

³ In *The Treatise of Man* (1632), Descartes insisted in specifying from the very beginning that the object of its treaty is not the real man but an imaginary one, *the man-machine*.

⁴ Because in his *Fables* La Fontaine attacked everyone, including his king, he preferred to put the message through the intermediary of animal protagonists for reasons of simple caution and so he created a fabulous world where animals speak, think, get dressed, have feelings just like their human counterparts.

⁵ Considered as masterpieces of Libertine art, Bergerac's *The Other World: The Comical History of the States and Empires of the Moon* and *The Comical History of the States and Empires of the Sun* present an "*upside-down world*" with the intention to satirise the philosophical, scientific, and religious certitudes of the 17th century.

⁶ Johannes Kepler wrote in 1634 his last work suggestively named *Somnium (The Dream)*, in which he described an imaginary society situated on the surface of the Moon.

Chronologically, the Baroque becomes a dominant reality in the seventeenth century Europe, but its beginnings must be sought in Italy's last decades of the fifteenth century. In other regions, however, such as Germany or the Colonial America, the Baroque has only appeared in the eighteenth century.

The first seeds appeared in Rome, the artistic capital of Europe, also the papal capital, and after that the Baroque style spread rapidly throughout Europe, undergoing transformations in contact with local traditions. In the catholic Flanders, the Baroque flourished in Rubens' works, but in the Netherlands, a predominantly protestant country, the Baroque only introduced slight accents, while in England it never took any deep roots. In France, the Baroque finds its maximum of expression in the service of the monarchy rather than in that of the Church. On the other hand, absolute monarchs such as Louis XIV, Catherine the Great, Frederick the Great contributed significantly to the spread of all Baroque arts by means of their patronage of the artists, composers, painters and actors.

The Baroque is the fruit of specific political, religious and scientific contexts. Its apparition has been largely influenced by the geographical discoveries of Vasco da Gama, Magellan and Cortez. Having provided the new technologies invented during the Renaissance (gunpowder, compass, new methods of naval construction), and animated by the desire to find new commercial routes and exotic goods, the explorers have discovered previously unknown lands, different kinds of people that have led the European culture to a state of shock, such as those practicing human sacrifices or even cannibalism, but, most of all, the explorers brought to Europe lots of gold, silver and precious stones. Having available a great wealth, the man of the Baroque era developed feelings of greed and prodigality.

On the other hand, if from the Antiquity to the Middle Ages the Ptolemy's geocentric theory of the solar system had remained intact, starting with the fifteenth century, scientists such as Nicolaus Copernicus, Tycho Brache, Johannes Kepler or Galileo Galilei have proved that the Earth revolves around the Sun, that the universe is infinite and it contains a multitude of suns around which innumerable planets revolve.

In the second half of the seventeenth century, a number of thinkers realized what Giordano Bruno had suggested back in 1584: the human being is a small point in the immensity of the Universe. The concept of infinite space generated at the time huge exaltation, but also huge anxiety. Realizing that the universe is infinite, the Baroque man observed that all the certainties disappeared. People

could no longer think that the Earth is the centre of creation or to believe in a static, immobile universe, where everybody's place is defined in a strictly hierarchic order. The centre was everywhere and the borders of the world, nowhere. For the great minds of the time that had brought these changes, the attempt to establish new connections between humans and divinity represented a large part of their research. Some have appealed to the emotional and intuitive realm, others to the strictly rational method.

In the Holy Roman Empire of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the gap between the Protestants and the Catholics was irreversibly deepening with the start of the religious wars that followed the apparition of the Protestant Reformation. The monumental Baroque style would confer to the papacy a formal way of expression in order to reinforce its prestige in the symbolic moment of the Counter-Reformation.

The religious conflicts installed an atmosphere of insecurity, a climate of war and passions. No doubt that the artists of the Baroque, both Protestants and Catholics, were influenced by the political and religious tumult of their era. The Baroque starts to assert itself after the Council of Trent, where it had been decided that art had to glorify God and the Church, counteracting thereby the accusations made at that time by the Protestants against the pompous ceremonies of the Catholic Church. Many Baroque works appeared at a time when the Jesuit Counter-Reformation was already in decline. Furthermore, many of these Baroque creations have been made by the Protestants who had initially cultivated the asceticism and the simplicity by an iconoclastic reform.

After the Council of Trent, the Church started a powerful propaganda against the Protestant Reformation using all the persuasive powers at its disposal: opulent architecture, eloquent oratories, paintings and sculptures with dramatic effects. The Catholic Church demanded that the paintings and the sculptures inside the churches should address the ignorant rather than knowledgeable. Thus, the Baroque style gave up the intellectual qualities of Mannerism of the sixteenth century in favor of a visceral art addressed to senses. A direct, simple, theatrical iconography appeared, characterized by colorful and pictorial prominent effects. On the other hand, the Jesuits understood the convincing power of the stage and began to proclaim the theatre as a pedagogical tool. By a humanistic alliance between Antiquity virtues and Christian morale they created images addressing the large audience. By the force of declamation, gestures and machineries, Jesuits

succeeded to express the motion of the religious exaltation in paintings and sculptures. In the Catholic Baroque, the world appears simultaneously as God's manifestation and as an illusion. On the other hand, the Baroque is linked to the religious experience of the man who lives in an era marked by a crisis which completely overbalanced the Renaissance humanism. Troubled after the Copernican and Lutheran revolutions, the man was in search of a solid landmark. Before that, when the Universe was conceived as touched by the presence of the Creator, everything represented a sign from God to the people. In the seventeenth century, the feeling that the world of nature and that of divine grace had become disjoint makes its appearance. The Baroque man is a pessimist as he has the feeling of searching God without being able to find Him. God is present, yet inaccessible. He gives Himself away to the man only in a state of ecstasy or in a dream. Even in the state of ecstasy, God is still obscure, he becomes a *Deus absconditus*. God seems to play with the man already overbalanced by an endless series of wars.

The Renaissance inherited from the Middle Ages the vision of a hierarchy based universe in which the world was seen as an ordered structure where God governed from the heavens, the man lived on the Earth, and Hell was the underground world. The structures of the earthly hierarchy from the political and religious spheres were led by representatives bearing the divine grace and were mirroring the eternal order.

In the Baroque era, the philosophy of the theatre, as well as that of the other arts, was that of mirroring the nature. In the sixteenth century, the conception of the Catholic theology, which placed the man and the Earth in the center of God's universe, was challenged by the scientific progresses and the Protestant Reformation. The Counter-Reformation triggered by the Catholic Church hoped to restore the lost harmony and order. The Baroque artists have operated in this context by creating dynamic works of art that overlapped the concern about the disorder of the world with a traditional representation of the hierarchies both in Heaven and on the Earth.

The support accorded by the Counter-Reformation to the theatre could not entirely overrun the antagonism between pious devotion and worldly amusement as, beyond its imposition by the Counter-Reformation of a globalizing Church, the Baroque theatre represented one of the cultural strategies of the political absolutism that wanted to forestall the imagination of the audience. The absolute

monarchy created at Versailles the most spectacular and theatrical expression of power.

The Baroque theatre evoked fantasy and imagination, metaphor and allegory, miracle and artifice. The stage designers applied in theatre the rules of perspective derived from the visual arts and the theatre became a metaphor of the social life. Everything was centered on the Man, as a powerful relationship between artist and spectator. By means of the *maraviglia*, the art becomes much closer to its beneficiary, thus dissolving the cultural gap which kept the distance between the art and the consumer. Although not new, the metaphor *Theatrum mundi* or *the world as a stage* was used by the Baroque playwrights in order to highlight the close connection between stage and reality. Shakespeare exploited this metaphor in his works, especially in the famous *As you Like It*, where he introduces the idea of our lives as a kind of theatre:

*“All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players”⁷.*

This theme found its highest expression in Pedro Calderon de la Barca’s plays. In his *El gran teatro del mundo* (*The Great Theater of the World*, c. 1645), the Spanish dramatist transforms Catholic dogma into an allegorical play as God himself is the theatre director, but also the source and creator of the elements of the play⁸.

⁷ *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, “As you like it,” act II, scene VII, Wordsworth Editions, Great Britain, 1996, p. 622.

⁸ “DIRECTOR. My little planet, my lovely planet,
I made you with these two hands.

....

Your Director is calling you.

Your all-powerful Director.

I whisper – and your forest dance.

I raise my hand – your hills take shape.

WORLD. Well, what do you plan to do?

Is there anything I can do for you?

.....

DIRECTOR. I want to make a festival

To celebrate my power ...

Human life is nothing but acting, so

Let Heaven sit in the best seats

To watch a play on your stage, World.

As I’m Director and the play is mine,

It shall be acted by my company

The artists and playwrights of the Baroque era used unlimited energies and an explosive creativity to redefine the relationship between art and life. The theatre was transformed into an imaginative model for the understanding of the world in all its aspects. Playwrights used a vertical visual hierarchy: the architecture of the stage obeyed the architecture of the world. The scene was characterized by machineries, width and spectacular. The highest areas (balconies, platforms, flying machineries) signified the King, the noblemen, God or gods and other positive characters. For example, in order to create the visual magic of the play, Shakespeare highlighted the supernatural qualities of *Tempest's* characters by using scene effects⁹. Typically, the sub-human Caliban¹⁰, son of the witch Sycorax and of the devil, appeared from underneath the stage through a hatch and was dressed like a sea monster, while Ariel¹¹, a good spirit, arose from the balcony, flying on overhead cables. Thus, it emphasized the duality between the celestial and the infernal worlds.

The discovery of Aristotle's *Poetics* in the fifteenth century will draw attention to the importance of the tragedy, but only much later – in the second half of the sixteenth century and throughout the next century - the Aristotelian fragment gets the attention of the humanists. New poetics, founded on the principles of the Stagirit, showed up. The purpose of these writings seemed to be mainly *the tragedy*, their primary destination being to satisfy the interest of a tragic background, which gradually emerged, initiating the new phenomenon of the Baroque¹². William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Tirso de Molina have set the foundation of modern tragedy, bringing life onto the stage, changing it into a fable.

Whether they want to act or not.

As I chose human beings to be

The most important creatures of all

They'll be the members of my company

And they shall act out, as well as they can,

The story of the play that's called The World.

I shall cast each in a suitable role". (Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *The Great Theatre of the World*, adapted by Adrian Mitchell, Dramatic Publishing, USA, 1994, pp. 9-12).

⁹ Charles Boyce, *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Shakespeare*, Wordsworth Editions, Great Britain, 1996, p. 633.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 88-89.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 32-33.

¹² Edgar Papu, *Barocul ca tip de existență*, vol I, Minerva Publishing, Bucharest, 1977, p. 45.

The Baroque characters, as they appear in playwrights' works of the age, were weak and fragile (Faust, Macbeth, Hamlet, Don Juan). In order to succeed, they need help or impulse, most of the times exceptional ones, such as the case of Mephistopheles, the witches in Macbeth, or the Ghost of Hamlet's father.

The major Shakespearean tragedies (*Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth, and King Lear*) focus on a powerful central character whose personal quality is the source of his catastrophe. He is the victim of his own strength, which will not allow accommodation with his situation and which will determine the character's tragic fate. For example, *Hamlet* develops the theme that humanity's weaknesses must be recognized as our inevitable human lot, for only by accepting our destiny can we transcend our mortality¹³. *Hamlet* is a moral drama whose theme is the existence of both good and evil in human nature, a central concern in Shakespeare's work as a whole. Hamlet, unable to alter the evil around him because of his fixation on the uncertainties of moral judgment, falls into evil himself in killing Polonius and rejecting Ophelia but finally recovers his humanity by recognizing his ties to others¹⁴ and blaming his madness because of which he made so much pain to others¹⁵.

This tragedy deals with death and sex and with the psychological and social tension arising from these basic facts of life. Hamlet treats these issues without providing clear-cut resolutions, thereby leaving us with complicated, highly emotional responses that causes both satisfaction - as seeing basic elements of our own lives treated dramatically - and pain - at the nagging persistence of these difficulties, as in real life.¹⁶

¹³ Charles Boyce, *op. cit.*, p. 652.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 653.

¹⁵ "Hamlet:

Give me your pardon, sir: I've done you wrong;

But pardon't, as you are a gentleman.

This presence knows, And you must needs have heard, how I am punisht

With sore distraction. What I have done,

That might your nature, honour, and exception

Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.

....

His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy.

Sir, in this audience,

Let me so disclaiming from a purposed evil" (The Complete Works of William Shakespeare,

"Hamlet", act V, scene II, Wordsworth Editions, Great Britain, 1996, pp. 710-711).

¹⁶ Charles Boyce, *op. cit.*, pp. 236-237.

Theatre means placing the man in time, understanding that there is always an end (*finita la comedia*). Painting or sculpture, and even music, do not imply the idea of ending in such a categorical form as tragedy. *Totus mundum agit histrionem* (*the entire world is a stage*) was the Latin motto embroidered on the flag fluttering above the *Shakespearean Globe Theater* and it expressed the glorious Elizabethan ambition of denying the limits of the power of imagination that the theatre used to call into play. In a culture promoting the spectacle, man could not easily make a distinction between theatre and reality. The world itself was seen as a phantasm. The world became an illusion with extremely dynamic landmarks which lost their stability thus the existence acquired tragic accents. There were tastes for nudity contemplation, and for the spectacle one's own death or that of others. Bones and skulls alongside nude contorted bodies decorated the tombstones. The frontispieces of the great baroque arcades of the access gates abounded in the images of senescence, represented by an old woman, alongside with images of youth, symbolized by the vigorous body of a young woman. Sometimes could be added the image of birth and death, represented by children and skeletons. The Counter-Reformation assumed as a symbol the pirate flag in which it saw a symbol of the fight against the savior ship of the Reform, which had to be sunk. "*We are the pirates who will sink your ark*" was the slogan that mobilized the army of the Counter-Reformation. The fight, the conflict was a consequence of the inconsistency of the man and of the nature of things. More than the Renaissance, the Baroque deepened the democratic spirit emanating from the works of the artists that abounded in nudity and death. Thus, a bizarre taste for this strange alliance of *eros* and *thanatos*, as Freud would name them later on, makes its appearance in the Baroque theatre, literature and painting.

In the case of the theatre, there were given a lot of importance to the suggestion of a loud voice, and to the alternation between the sound and the silence. The artist dies as an artist when the curtain falls; the applause represents a magical act by means of which the performer must be brought back to life and extracted from the artistic duplication trance.

Music too will be influenced by the theatre. The glitter and the ostentation become the expression of the contamination of music from the categories of the theatre, of a music that largely substitutes its penetrating character by a striking one, by a shock therapy on the audience. As a result, Baroque music became elaborated and dramatic, being able to express human emotions. The Baroque art

became significantly secular rather than to glorify the Church. Music no longer belonged to the church, but was available to all.

Baroque era lies under the mark of black and white, of the visible and the occult. The violent contrasts of the time emanated even from the clothing imposed by Spanish fashion, outlining the opposition between the white laces from the neck and wrists and the rest of the garment, which was black. The wig, which added an extra artificiality, became a personal property. Furthermore, the shaving techniques highlight the beard and the moustache. Excesses of all kinds followed by ascetic conversions into monasteries are common features of the era, and greed and prodigality followed by penance became fashionable symptoms. Every characteristic of the Baroque era reflects duality of intense emotions: love, hate, exaltation, astonishment, jealousy, hatred.

On the other hand, graphics and the printing machine create a chromatically dual universe between the black ink and the white paper, inspiring to a certain extent the *Clair - obscure* (*chiaroscuro*) of the great Dutch school painters of the time who used bold contrast of light and dark shade in order to produce a dramatic impression upon the viewer.

The Baroque art created the model of *Homo duplex*, an ambiguous being, highly contrasting, who, depending on the angle from which he is viewed, may be the exact opposite of the initial image. Faced with the infinite Universe, the man was divided between a reasonable intellect, capable of spontaneous participation to divine wisdom and volition, and a sensorial nature, which plunged humanity into all the evils of a libertine climate. *Homo duplex* is a specific way of the Baroque man to relate to oneself as a being capable of pure reasonable intuition and self-determination, but perturbed by sensorial inclinations and desires. This way of pertaining to oneself induced a strong feeling of dissatisfaction and unfulfillment.

As a *Homo duplex*, the Baroque man lived with the highest intensity the ambivalence of the power created by the conflict between Catholics and Protestants, between the national spirit assessed by the Renaissance and the universal patronage of the world by the Catholic Church. Thus, in the Baroque era, what is good for some, for the others it becomes evil. The same thing is good or evil, loved or detested, according to the angle of the view.

The Baroque stays under the mark of duality which manifests itself even in the highlighting of the opposition between God and Devil. The most profound expression of this dualism can be seen in Goethe's *Faustus*, which reflects the

spirit of the late Baroque. The seventeenth century knew a true epidemic evil manifested at the level of the European conscience. The main agent of evil, the character found at the origin of great demonic crises, is the woman, perceived as an ambivalent being, attractive and repulsive, good and bad, strong and weak at the same time. Everything that means dualism will be found in the perception of woman in this great era of transition from the Renaissance to the Modern Classicism.

The Baroque era corresponds with the most intense period of conflict between the Aristotelian ideas, which by Thomism had become official for the scholastic spirit, on one hand, and the gnosis, originating in the Platonist metaphysics, on the other hand. The Baroque era is the time of Platonist philosophy's supremacy against the Aristotelian one, for the great lesson of the Platonism, that Aristotle had tried to temper, was exactly the detection of a dual reality structuring between a sensible cosmos and an intelligible one.

Plato developed metaphysics of the Logos, of the idea as a trans-sensible reality. At the opposite pole, Aristotle – interested in the natural sciences as well – was fascinated by life, motion and individuation, in the meaning of reality subjected to the senses (*haecceitate*)¹⁷. In the dialogue *Republic*, Plato sends away the artists out of the ideal city, as those who would waste time copying sensitive objects would simply perform an act of *mimesis*. But, still in the *Republic*, the founder of the Academy develops a more important concept, namely that the sensations, incorporating contradictions inside of them, are eventually those opening the path to the intelligible world. Just as in *Phedon*, where he offers the example of the equal sticks that suggest to the intellect an idea of equality, Plato concludes in the *Republic* that a certain object can be both *feathery or heavy, small or big, unique or multiple*, according to one or another point of view, and all these qualities give birth to reflection by means of which the intelligence deduces the general and abstract ideas of weight, size and unit.

The idea, the ultimate truth, appears thus as a synthesis born from antinomies. This vision will come true in the *dualism* that characterizes the cultural attitudes of the Baroque. The Baroque era discovers that an antinomy is possible within the same unit and that the object is not something unique and independent, but a shadow that copied invisible models. The Baroque artists understood that a

¹⁷ Octavian Nistor, *Între antichitate și renaștere. Gândirea evului mediu*, vol. II, Minerva Publishing, Bucharest, 1984, p. 214

work of art and the creation in general represent only a suggestion, a way to infer perfection, the Absolute that transcends this world. The Baroque realizes, in its essence, that the more violent an antinomy is, the more it directs to an evocation of the Absolute. Plato has offered the modernity the idea that the representation is merely an instrument and not a reality. The Baroque phenomenon is, though, much more complex to possibly be exhausted by the Neo-Platonism, even if the two currents are linked by deep connections¹⁸.

The antinomy, the contradiction between man and the world, appears equally alive in the great myths of damnation, such as those of *Don Juan*, *Ahasverus* and *Don Quixote* (*Don Quijote*), who capture the interior conflict, felt at maximum intensity by the man who discovers that the world surrounding him is nothing but an illusion, a reproduction of shadows that become pretexts for awakening the nostalgia of the absolute.

The myths of the modernity hide a more profound meaning, which is the unbound, free, independent human condition, the *human release*. Don Juan undermines in every way the bond of marriage. He seduces women mostly on their wedding night, fights with all his weapons against this institution he wants to discredit and destroy. In this myth we can recognize influences of the chatare doctrine according to which this world is merely a kingdom of Satan and every bond to it, even by marriage, which gives birth to babies and establish the foundation of property, must be discarded.

Why has he to do this? Because Don Juan, the Chatar, is aiming for a reality beyond the representations, beyond the stipulations of the sensible that are nothing but betrayals of an evil genius.

Another extremely significant myth from the point of view of the human's release, but a lot more profound than the myth of Don Juan, is that of Ahasverus, the Wandering Jew, who does not break his bonds with the sensible world but distances himself even from God. He does not recognize Jesus. This breaking of the bonds with God, this non-recognition of the after-world, of the Absolute, will be the condition of his damnation. Ahasverus will wander through the world until the end of the time without a goal, like a diurnal Sisyphus. Adam was punished to death as a result of his disbelief and disobedience. Ahasverus, in his turn, expects

¹⁸ Al. Cioranescu, *Barocul sau descoperirea dramei*, Dacia Publishing, Cluj-Napoca, 1980, pp. 400-402.

death as a gift from God, for he possesses an Immortality that means wandering, lack of goal, a terrible curse, being rejected by the Divinity.

The myth of Don Quixote (Don Quijote) reflects the condition of a man living in a world with which he broke the ties, but that he wants to substitute by a fantastic, idealistic world, substitution that will become the condition of comic, or, in other words, of a tragicomic built by Cervantes through his famous character.

The myth of Faustus, in its original form, expresses the drama of the man whose ties with the world are broken, who can no longer find out with the help of science or magic the solution of his fulfillment, of the man who made a pact with Satan himself in order to find that moment of identification with the Universe which will produce his happiness and also will trigger his exaltation crowned by the formula: *Moment, stop!*

The enthusiasm born in the era of the Renaissance in front of the power of the man to know and to integrate himself into this world ends in breaking of the bonds, ends in defeat and doubt. We can capture this reality by studying also the ideal of the Man and the kind of the social virtue imposed by the Renaissance as opposed to what the Baroque will do to this ideal. In the Renaissance, the courtier, *il cortigiano, il uomo universale*, is the prototype for the confidence and the optimism felt by the human being about a possible integration in this world, integration in which the man holds a privileged status of *axis mundi*, the center of the world. The Universe of the Renaissance has a human face; thus for Leonardo da Vinci the Earth is nothing but a huge organism resembling the human body; the rocks are the bones, the ground is the flesh, the rivers represent the circulatory system and the forests are the hair. From this vision, according to which man and nature are one and the same thing, the Baroque makes the transition towards *il discreto, the libertine*, the incarnation of freedom, the man who no longer gets involved seriously in anything, the man that aspires, just like the courtier, to become *an universal man*, but who no longer lives with the same intensity as the first one his bond to this world. In this tearing apart of the man from the world we can find the origin of what will become later, in the modern era, the metaphysics of subjectivity, subjectivity installing itself as something of a completely different nature from the universe. The Baroque represents the moment when the feeling that the evolution of the human kind resembles the motions of a huge pendulum, always swinging back and forth, imposes itself more than ever. The religious indifference and the artistic and literary interest of the Renaissance have been followed by the artistic indifference and the religious enthusiasm of the Protestant

Reformation. Between these extremes the Jesuit Counter-Reformation is born, imposing the new Baroque spirit that will dominate Western Europe between the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries.

This oscillation will reinforce even more in the consciousness of Baroque people the complexity of the reality, its duality, its ambiguity, the fact that in life we situate ourselves on totally different positions, without losing our profound unity. Regardless of the diversity of our manifestations, there is a certain something, beyond them, on which they are based. The discovery of the antinomy, which is specific for the Baroque, ensures its originality. It is the direct consequence of the Renaissance spirit that had tried in vain to impose a certain kind of human freedom, freedom that becomes its biggest conflict. In order to understand this it is enough to remind ourselves the content of the famous fragment from Pico della Mirandola's work, written in 1486, *De hominis dignitate*, where the human being is presented just from the beginning as a stressed existence because he can assume a large range of manifestations, from the superior forms, in their most profound meaning, to the last degradation that not even an animal can reach.¹⁹

Pico della Mirandola states that the man is bonded neither by a place nor a special form and that happens because God had offered him a privileged status, that of rising above all other creatures, but also the risk of sinking beneath the level of any of them.²⁰ To Italian philosopher, the man is condemned to an

¹⁹ "At man's birth the Father placed in him every sort of seed and sprouts of every kind of life. The seeds that each man cultivates will grow and bear their fruit in him. If he cultivates vegetable seeds, he will become a plant. If the seeds of sensation, he will grow into brute. If rational, he will come out a heavenly animal. If intellectual, he will be an angel, and a son of God." (Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *On the dignity of man*, Translation by Charles Glenn Wallis, Paul JW Miller, and Douglas Charmichael, Hackett Publishing, USA, 1998, p. 5).

²⁰ "... He took up man, a work of indeterminate form; and, placing him at the midpoint of the world, He spoke to him as follows:

«We have given to thee, Adam, no fixed seat, no form of thy very own, no gift peculiarly thine, that thou mayest feel as thine own, have as thine own, possess as thine own the seat, the form, the gifts which thou thyself shalt desire. A limited nature in other creatures is confined within the laws written down by Us. In conformity with thy free judgment, in whose hands I have placed thee, Thou art confined by no bounds; and thou wilt fix limits of nature for thyself. I have placed thee at the center of the world, that from there thou mayest more conveniently look around and see whatsoever is in the world. Neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal have We made thee. Thou, like a judge appointed for being honorable, art the molder and maker of thyself; thou mayest sculpt thyself into whatever shape thou dost prefer. Thou canst grow downward into the lower

existence in a dual spectrum. This antinomic consequence, that is the discovery of the duality, could be integrated by some thinkers into a genuine metaphysics that will culminate in the theory of *opposed coincidences*, crowned by the Giordano Bruno's pantheist vision of the world.

This kind of solutions is opposed by the original visions of the great modern skeptics, thinkers who could not assimilate the contradiction, preferring to remain in savant ignorance. In this respect, it is relevant to mention the conception of Michel de Montaigne who notices that the same causes can lead to different effects and that completely different causes can lead to the same effect. Contemporary both, the two thinkers use many common themes, portraying the baroque ambivalence in their works. Thus the famous formula from Bruno's *Candelaio: In tristitia hilaris, in hilaritate tristis*²¹ reminds us of the title of the XXXVIIth Chapter of Montaigne's *Essays* entitled *How We Weep and Laugh*, in which, using several examples, the author highlights the contradiction of certain situations in which the reason for joy, in a certain sense justified, is at the same time the reason for deep suffering. Montaigne offered the example of king Xerxes who took joy in admiring his huge army, but felt sad to the tears imagining how many of the soldiers would never return home.²²

The world of the skeptics no longer has fixed landmarks, no longer gravitates around a principle of authority, of a single reference, but sees open every possibility. Although unprepared for this situation, the Baroque man has the freedom to use his free will. In this feature of the Baroque period can be found what will be called the human tragedy in front of the uselessness of the free will, in the best case scenario, or can be found what may become the abuse of badly understood freedom, in the worst case scenario, that will throw the Baroque man in the middle of an endless chain of wars.

With bitterness, the wise man who recently left the easy optimism of the Renaissance discovers that not all people are born to be free, that not all of them

natures which are brutes. Thou canst again grow upward from thy soul's reason into the higher natures which are divine». (Ibidem, pp. 4-5).

²¹ Giordano Bruno, *Lumânărarul*, Fundația Culturală Română Publishing, Bucharest, 2000, p. 17.

²² "Artabanus took unawares Xerxes, his nephew, and chid him for the sudden change of his countenance. He was observing the immeasurable greatness of his forces crossing the Hellespont: at first he felt a thrill of joy to see so many thousands of men in his service, and manifested it by the cheerfulness and animation of his face; and all suddenly, in one instant, as it came into his mind that all those lives would be no more in a hundred years at furthest, he knitted his brows and saddened even to tears". (Michel de Montaigne and George B. Ives, *The Essays of Michel de Montaigne. Part One*, Kessinger Publishing, USA, 2005, p. 316).

know what they want, that not all of them are willing to command and to obey to themselves. Condemned by the evolution of the Western culture to not to be able to believe, taught by the force of the tradition not to entrust to others the difficult mission of thinking by themselves, the people of the Baroque era were left with an anxiety born by the use of the free will in an useless, and more than that, dangerous way. The drama, the conflict announced by the Baroque, marking the fate of all subsequent European cultures, is illustrated by Nietzsche when, in his book *Beyond Good and Evil*, after announcing the death of God, considers necessary the abolition of the free will.

The release of the individual by means of the great work of the Renaissance turns for the Baroque man into an inheritance resembling more a burden. The freedom, that no one understands any longer, appears to be, in this cultural current, an important source of the disintegration of the man. Most thinkers of the Baroque era understood the fact that doubt is the price of freedom that the Renaissance had conquered. Any doubt can be ended by choice, but the choice, no matter what is its nature, inevitably marks the end, the loss of freedom.

The Baroque is the era of weak people, submitted to destiny, terrified, living in cohabitation with the demon awakened after a long somnolence and which, as Luther said, was closer to man than his own shirt. The Baroque character simply throws itself to events that inevitably lead him to disaster. A threatened existence, whose tragic meaning is the fact that he understands his own despair as he knows there is no way out. The Baroque characters are in the situation of a Checkmate with the destiny. No solution, only sterile repetition of blockages that seem to be endless. The repetitiveness of the Baroque art reflects precisely this inability to overcome the crisis despite a tremendous effort. The repetition, as an artistic style of expression reflecting the contradiction that cannot be overcome, can be viewed in the creations of the philosophers from that period, from Giordano Bruno to Blaise Pascal.

The risks of choice and of laying the foundations of a new model of freedom have been exemplarily assumed by the philosophers who will impose the rational method and will open, though in a pretty ambiguous manner, the modern spirit: Bacon and Descartes, for whom *the idols* or *the hyperbolic doubt* are just the beginning of the method and not a state of facts.

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