THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE AESTHETICS OF THE SACRED

Doina BUTIURCA[1]

Abstract

The separation from Greek philosophy, the re-evaluation of the Ideas of Plato, the trans-sensorial aspirations, the interest for the "intellectual" beauty as well as the reflections consecrated to sensitive beauty are some of the basic ideas of Plotinus' philosophy that has created a truly special value to the history of aesthetic thinking. The aesthetic ideas of the philosopher formed at Alexandria, of which the Idea as the spiritual source of "beauty" in art, the definition of the concept of "beauty" as a revelation of the spirit in matter, the cathartic function of art is grafted upon a metaphysical research pattern we will discuss explicitly in our study.

Keywords: aesthetics - metaphysical foundations; Plotinus; the Aesthetics of the Holy Scripture.

I. The Neoplatonician aesthetics

0. The term "poetics" comes from the French word poétique (Lat. poetica; Gr. poiitiki) and designates a theoretic work regarding the principles, the laws of literary creation, in general, and of poetry, in particular. In a general aspect poetics means discipline devoted to the literary phenomenon, under a theoretical aspect. Historically, the faculty of artistic creation especially in Ancient Greece, is a philosophical problem, related *ab initio* to the judgments which were pronounced on the occasions of poetic challenges. In the Greco-Roman culture, the typology of art has been theorized in various aspects, which for the modern investigator means as many forms of aesthetic diversion: "pure hedonism", "moralism or the pedagogical", "aesthetic mysticism," etc. (Benedetto Croce).

1. *Theory of fair proportions: the concept of the "beautiful" and the harmony of closed systems at Plato.*

In Plato's understanding (The Republic) beauty was the expression of harmony between the parts and/or the unity between parts and the whole. The mathematic rules, the simple relations have the capacity of producing beauty. The relations between the part and the whole are universal, Plato refers to the system of sounds, to the forms of the material world, to the literary work or to the whole universe as a system. The aesthetic category of the "beautiful" is thus an objective reality, independent of the personal characteristics of the person who contemplates it and/or independent of the writer, if we refer to the literary creation. "The beautiful" is given by any system perfectly enclosed within its own limits, a system that cancelled the intrinsic dynamics, the evolution, the innovation, a system of "proportions" which means the reinstatement of some divisions and differences... in order to integrate into the cosmic eurhythmics, in the great concert of the universe." (Andrei Coman 2003: 214).

From the perspective of the modern such a concept is inadmissible especially in the case of the literary discourse. None of the modern art forms can illustrate the concept

[1] Associate Prof. PhD., „Petru Maior" University of Târgu-Mureş

BDD-A2902 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-21 05:02:53 UTC)

of "beauty" if it has the quality to be a perfectly closed, dogmatic system. Poetry shines through metaphor, "open" (to interpretation), the literary work itself remains what Umberto Eco called "opera aperta". The ineffable, the sublime, the imaginary are dimensions impossible to subdue to patterns of an objective nature.

Then there is the problematic of method in art, connected to the concept of *mimesis* (gr. *μίμησις*) which oscillates between the meaning of 'imitation' and that of 'representation'. In *The Republic* Plato asked the question whether art as *mimesis* is an expression of the soul (the seat of virtue) or of primary sensuality and of passion, addressing for the first time in European culture, a problem of aesthetics. Unlike Aristotle, Plato believes that imitation refers to things in the order of nature, the immediate image, and therefore art cannot rise to the concept, to the idea. Reason enough for the poets and for poetry to be excluded from Plato's perfect republic.

2. Plotinus: to accede to the One. In the context of this "neo-Pythagorean concert" (Andrei Coman, 2003), saturated by mathematical representations of beauty as mathematical symmetry, the extent and arrangement of elements, a dissonant, almost strident voice is heard in late antiquity"(ibid.). It is the voice of Plotinus, author of the 54 treaties included by his disciple Porphyrios in the work entitled the *Enneads*. Detaching himself from the theory of fair proportions, Plotinus notes that harmony "is a principle of intellect, lacking parts" that come into mathematical relationships. The Intellect is Unique. The Neoplatonician Absolute cannot be known by rational methods, the analytical spirit being refused. To accede to the One requires the way of direct perception - ecstasy - the release of the spiritual identity of the being from the surrounding reality. Ecstasy means supreme love and love ennobles through the power of the divine, and therefore it means the cancellation of duality and the revelation of absolute Beauty. Ecstasy - the only way to happiness - is revealing and constitutes the only way for the soul to merge with the Absolute.

2.1. *Aesthetics - metaphysical foundations.* In the early Middle Ages, the philosopher - having the view that all things have as a basis an absolute reality - creates the foundations of "mystical" aesthetics: art is a unique way to reach the absolute, to penetrate the ultimate essence of that simple reality - something the author of the treatise "On Beauty" called the One. Only through the philosophy of Plotinus, beauty and art merge in a unique concept, not through a happy reduction of the Platonic equivocal concept of beauty to the univocal concept of art, but by reabsorbing what is distinct in being confusing, to imitative art in the so-called beautiful." (Croce 1971: 234). Plotinus can be considered in a certain sense the father of modern poetics of the sacred. His aesthetics was unusual both in its metaphysical foundations and in its empirical analysis of beauty. The spiritualism and the transcendentalism were in the note of time (W. Tatarkiewicz1 1978: 461). We note a first difference from the traditional concept generally accepted in Greece. The philosopher rejected the Pythagorean definition for reasons worthy of consideration: if beauty depends on symmetry, it would appear only in complex objects

BDD-A2902 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-21 05:02:53 UTC)

and should not be present in an isolated color or sound, nor identifiable in the sun, in gold or in lightning" (W. Tatarkiewicz 1978: 462). Gold, light, heat, sound are elements lacking complexity, but are charged with a divine beauty.

2.2. *The beautiful - or revelation by Idea* The philosopher rejects the concept of "beauty" understood as a mathematics of external forms. Beauty is in concrete things (fire, light, lightning, gold is beautiful), but also in abstract forms of music, of poetry. It also exists in science, virtue, in gestures and habits, in the things of the senses and in the supersensible. Here are the four arguments of the philosopher: the beautiful is the affinity which is established between things of the sensible world and our soul, through the Idea. Only the form in communion with the sacred is beautiful, the being the soul of which has the divine splendor in it. The soul is the cause of bodily beauty. Plotinus wrote the following on this: "The soul creates, as one says, the bodies. It (...) makes everything it touches and possesses beautiful, as far as it is possible for those things to share beauty (Plotinus 2003: 298). A second argument through which "beauty" as mathematics of forms is rejected starts from the premise that the same face can appear more or less beautiful according to its expression (ibid.). This fact could not be possible if beauty would be an attribute of matter, of the proportions alien to ideas. Thirdly, beauty cannot find its expression in "matching" as long as phenomenologically we can speak about "match in bad" as well. The fourth argument Plotinus used is that a concept as "symmetry" is applicable to the determined order of the material world and never to the spiritual dimension (human knowledge or virtue cannot have the quality of being symmetrical). By these arguments the Pythagorean concept whereby beauty is the expression of a relation (this idea founded the complete ancient aesthetics) is replaced with the thesis that beauty is - before all - a quality. If the symmetry of the parts as source of beauty in ancient aesthetics loses its validity, the question is what is the source of beauty. Let us see what the thinker wrote: ... Beauty is in what lights proper proportioning rather than in the neat proportions themselves, and this is just what we like (Plotinus, Opere I 2003: 307).The essence of beauty is what reveals symmetry and revelation can only come from the Idea. The source of beauty is not matter, nor colour, but the soul as it has something divine, which is part of beauty (Plotinus). Ancient aesthetics approached sensible beauty and intellectual beauty in different manners, sometimes even dichotomous ones. Plotinus adopts a novel position: beauty is an attribute of the sensible world which nevertheless reveals the intellectual world (W. Tatarkiewicz 1978: 464), it is the revelation of the spirit in material forms: What similarities are there between the beautiful things from here and from there? - asked the philosopher. How can these and those be beautiful as well? The fact, I said, is possible by the participation of the idea. (Plotinus 2003: 246).

2.3. *The transcendental model and the cathartic function of art* This world - as a projection and manifestation of the sensorial that is never perfect and the one from "there", the spiritual one, of the absolute freedom of thought are two antithetical worlds. Unlike Plato, the scholar trained in Alexandria put above all sensible beauty, considering that its perfection is consubstantial of the divine world. The source of artistic and natural

BDD-A2902 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-21 05:02:53 UTC)

beauty is the same: the idea which transgresses matter and artwork alike. In the history of aesthetic thought Plotinus remained the philosopher who foresaw/introduced the concept of "internal sense" giving it aesthetic value. The concept will be imposed by the empirical aestheticians of England in the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century (let us mention works such as *Pleasures of the imagination* signed by Addison (1672-1719) or the works of Shaftesbury (1671-1713) and Francis Hutcheson). If in his conception the archetypal source of beauty resides in the internal shape of things, Plotinus distanced himself from his forerunners through his belief that nature is superior to art, the philosopher would remain tributary to the old conception of ancient Greece. The effects of Neoplatonism upon modern aesthetics were the most profound and this despite of the inherent exaggerations. Here is a synthesis of some of these: the work is the mirror of the soul, the only one endowed with unity, reason and form. The function of art is not purely representational, but also a cathartic one: Arts create more through themselves, as they possess beauty, they imprint it on things lacking it (Plotinus). Any work of art sums up the idea from the artist's head, an idea the scholar considers to be a metaphysical phenomenon, bearing the mark of the transcendental model. Art is a figurative knowledge through images that give the human being an intellectual vision of the world. For the first time in ancient aesthetics Plotinus - from the standpoint of a metaphysician - advances the idea that dominates modern Europe, the fusion of art and beauty (Even the bad artist creates images, truly ugly ones). And also for the first time he conceives beauty as an intangible image of a transcendent model.

II. The Aesthetics of the Holy Scripture

Despite the Holy Scripture was used for centuries in purposes other than aesthetics, Christian writers discovered in its pages ideas referring to beauty, profound ones, especially in the Old Testament, usually consubstantial to the images and symbols of light. In *Genesis, The Book of Wisdom and Song of Solomon* the word *kalos* is ubiquitous (especially in the Greek version). In the boundless and timeless dimension of the Creator, beauty born from the light is a principle, is a norm: 'And God saw the light that it is beautiful "(Genesis I.4.) and there is a parallelism which is not at all coincidental with the term *good.* Excluding the presumption of preexisting materials, the world, much like the work of art is beautiful because it is the conscious creation of a thoughtful being: "And God saw everything that he had made: and behold, it was very beautiful" (Gen. I.31.). The adjective "beautiful" has a broader meaning referring to both instinsic and extrinsic qualities. Even if in the verse in *Genesis* the real meaning of the word "beautiful" is that God's entire creation "turned out right" (W. Tatarkiewicz 2, 1978:12), the form of the absolute superlative induces the idea of the sublime. The verse is of great significance for aesthetics as it refers to the beauty of the universe in the first place and then - indirectly - to the Idea that gives matter identity, ennobling creation. This, especially since the term appears in the context, along with 'good', whose semantic values the biblical concepts, in particular. Frequency is a good indication in this regard: if the suggestion of the

BDD-A2902 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-21 05:02:53 UTC)

sublimation of creation by divine intervention is formed through a single verse in the first chapter of Genesis, the exclusively moral attitude to the world becomes the leitmotif through repeating (five times) the verse, "And God saw that it was good" (Genesis I.8.10.12.18.25.). This comparison is able to highlight the fundamental idea of Christian worship namely that beauty, in practice, has no role. It was just the way to create an overwhelming Universe. The Greek conception of the beauty of the "world" was introduced later by successive translations of the Septuagint and has continued to diversify its connotations. The research on the idea of beauty and creation have turned to *Proverbs* as well. This *Book of Wisdom of Solomon*, as it was called is essentially a collection of sayings from Jewish wisdom, taken over by Christianity with inner amendments of the gospel of Christ. The Greek *paroimiai "*saying" is the translation based on the biblical language of the Hebrew *misle*, which becomes in the *Vulgata proverbiae*, a term which will subsequently be adopted by European languages. The *Proverbs* are part from the thematical point of view in the category of didactic poetry, organised on a structure typical to the Biblica proverb (the source is the direct observation of immediate realities; the form is lapidary, plastic, often metaphorical). Here is the first verse: "To know wisdom and instruction" (Chap. I, 2) in which "instruction" translates the restricted sense of the Greek *paideia* (education or instruction of children - in Bartolomeu Valeriu Anania's interpretation). Having a moralizing effect, the proverbs contain the full range of isses on human morality and social life, reported to supreme virtue and cultivates from this perspective, the concepts of wisdom ("Tell wisdom to be your sister" Chapter 7,1) and the "moral good" in the world order. Paradoxically the *Proverbs* exploit the concept of beauty to a very large extent: "A man who delights in beauty gladdens the heart." It is the beauty of creation, conceived as the divine print through which the beauty of the Creator passes through - analogically: "Because of the size and beauty of creatures you can know better, considering you, the one that he built" (Chapter 13,5). Natural beauty is associated with the beauty of the divine mystery, wisdom but also the beauty of the work of art, the one man has sublimed to such an extent that he considers the things made by human hands to be gods. Frequently enough such concepts coexist with philosophical ideas of Pythagorean and Platonic origin. The compulsory temperance, the measure in the work of art seems to be rather a reflection of a mathematical theory: "but all you have appointed to measure the number and balance" (Chapter 11, 20). It has been rightly said that the valorification of such a theory in a Christian book proves the extent of the Greek influence and in this case not only on the translation but on the whole book (W. Tatarkiewicz 2 1978, 14). The gain was on the side of medieval aesthetics which starting from the authority of the Holy Scripture has used the concepts of balance and measure in art. Along with the Greeks acceptions on beauty and balance the idea of the insignificance of manifesting beauty entered the sacred texts - under the influence of the Hebrews who were not as occupied with the extrinsic aspects of existence. Moreover the *Proverbs* warns against the vanity of beauty and of perishability, a literary motif used throughout European poetry: "Tricky is the charm and beauty is vain" (31.30). Exterior beauty is

BDD-A2902 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-21 05:02:53 UTC)

considered a "quality" only insofar it is the sign of the invisible. The two opposing concepts, "beauty as vanity" and, "as a manifestation of divine beauty" are found not only in Christian aesthetics but also in European secular literature. The very concept of art has a double sense: art is both a direct and symbolic perception. The Song of Solomon illustrates another feature of the Hebrew vision on beauty, as judged by two characteristics of the beloved: moral purity and inaccessibility, "Beautiful're like a smile, baby, / and you are lovely as Jerusalem ..." (Song of Songs, Ch 6.4.)

Bibliography

Sources

ANANIA Bartolomeu Valeriu. *Biblia sau Sfânta Scriptură*, Editura Institutului Biblic şi de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române : Bucharest, 2011.

PLOTIN. *Opere I*, Romanian translation and notes by Andrei Cornea, Editura Humanitas: Bucharest, 2003.

Theoretical references

CROCE, Benedetto. *Estetica*, Romanian translation by Dumitru Trancă, notes by Nina Facon, Editura Univers: Bucharest, 1971.

TATARKIEWICZ, Wladyslaw. *Istoria esteticii I-IV*, Romanian translation by Sorin Mărculescu, Editura Meridiane: Bucharest, 1978.

BDD-A2902 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-21 05:02:53 UTC)