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PHD THESIS

(abstract)

**SCIENTIFIC ADVISOR:
PHD PROF. CORNEL-ALEXANDRU TATAY**

**PHD STUDENT:
MIRCEA-ALEXANDRU GLIGOR**

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**MEDIEVAL IMAGINARY IN 14th TO 16th
CENTURY WESTERN PAINTING
(abstract)**

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A momentous era, The Middle Ages reformulated the European Man's identity through a history whose significance concerns not only political events, but also society, art, literature and religion. Combined, the latter three have shaped a rich, mystical and, often, cryptologic imaginary.

In *The Medieval Imaginary in 14th to 16th Century Western Painting* I will discuss the devil, death, alchemy and the expressivity that these subjects have reached in painting; each will be explored in a separate part of this thesis. Each chapter is composed of a series of subchapters on history, theology or literature, followed by an inquiry into the work of art. The three main chapters have been designed to have a common root (usually the Bible), a separate trunk, and an outcome that leads from one part to another.

I chose the medieval imaginary surrounding the devil, death and alchemy in the 14th to 16th centuries because I find this time period to be the most effervescent and the most revolutionary for the mutations that have occurred inside Western Society. During these three centuries, the population has witnessed the most destructive epidemic in its entire history; it has seen the dawn of the Ottoman threat and its imminent siege on Europe; with the Hundred Years' War it has suffered great losses, but also territorial and cultural transformations; it has also seen the first major crisis of the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Reformation. These events are only some of the most significant that have built a medieval imaginary which reach maturity in depictions of the devil, death and occult sciences. All three subjects are analyzed from both an historical and artistic point of view, from an embryonal stage to the defining of their maturity.

I wish to insist that this thesis is not and has never been designed to be (or become) a catalogue of works of art linked to the three main subjects I have chosen to discuss. Nor was it meant to gather as many examples as possible. It was never my intention to elaborate a compendium of all the literary works or all the primary historiographic sources that discuss these subjects. What I wished for was to offer a new point of view, to try to bring an innovation in the inquiry on these subjects, thereby honoring the creative act that has constructed the medieval imaginary of Western painting in the 14th to 16th centuries.

The first part, dedicated to the image of the devil, tries to recompose the history of this character, starting with the Old Testament and the Ancient Cultures. I focused on clearly distinguishing satan from Satan, the devil, Lucifer and from the demon, thus analyzing the meaning of each. On the premise of a common confusion, perpetuated during the entirety of the two Christian millennia, I have analyzed the image of Jehovah in the Old Testament, to prove that the devil and God do not exist in this part of the Bible. Thus, Jehovah is a deity, concomitant in love and vengeance, there being no need for a diabolical figure to counteract him. The Hebrews were a migratory people and they came into contact with the Sumerian-Akkadian, the Egyptian and the Phoenician civilizations, thus borrowing their legends, images of idols and other characters that have gained a more or less negative valence in the pages of the Holy Scripture. The presence of an adversary, an enemy or an obstacle, *s-t-n*, has been misinterpreted by Christians as the devil. This adversary is not a negative and independent entity, but rather an agent of Jehovah. He only acts under strict and divine supervision. Satan in the Old Testament is not a parasite of the human spirit, nor is he capable of much destructive force in relevance with him.

The New Testament brings the devil to the fore, as one of its main characters. He is now a true adversary of man and God. The Divinity now lacks any negative feature, while the devil cumulates all evil, manipulation and the sum of all sins. The *Book of Enoch* and the *Book of Jubilees*, both apocryphal according to Christian tradition in Europe, try to make a connection between the Old and the New Testament, introducing the image of the fallen angels in the biblical Genesis. The devil evolves from its embryonal stage straight to its maturity in the two sections of the Bible, without any justification whatsoever to this evolution. Hence, the two apocryphal books, written in the centuries passing from the pagan to the Christian Eras, become

a bridge for the image of the devil. This character gains large powers in the New Testament, although we notice the subtlety in evoking the inferiority of its statute in relationship to God. Therefore, I have theorized the existence of a trinomial between God, the devil and the human, where the last two are always under the supreme act of decision of the First, man being on the lowest step of this hierarchy. In the Old Testament, man doesn't always have the power of free will, in the New Testament however, he always has this power therefore he is capable to protect himself from the devil.

The same evolution appears in the definition of the Inferno, which becomes mature in the New Testament, using the same bridge, constructed by the *Book of Enoch* and the *Book of Jubilees*. But the definition of the house of the devil appears geographically and hierarchically structured only in Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. There are a lot of theologians and medieval philosophers that have fortified the interdependency between man, the devil and God. The relationship between the three of them can almost always be interpreted as a legal report between Judge, prosecutor and defendant.

The devil is a governor only inside his own house, but even there he is under the jurisdiction of God, by being his bailiff. His image in painting is more linked to history than to theological and philosophical ideas. The imaginary has evolved from an interference of Christianity with the influences of pagan cultures, where the descriptive elements of deities were transferred straight in the construction of the devil's physical traits. On the other hand, the chromatics has evolved in concomitance with the emphasis of diabolical monstrosity. The first Christian Millennium depicts the devil as a secondary and anthropomorphic character. With the debut of the second millennium, his traits take over more and more features from pagan cultures, with new elements in the symbolism of sin. From a chromatic perspective, the iconographic representations use mostly blue – or shades of this color – in depicting the diabolical being. The long series of wars and epidemics has profoundly influenced the fear of the devil, which will become more and more linked to the act of death. Therefore, the devil's colors will turn – starting from the 15th century – to green and shades of brown, nuances associated with death and disease.

The devil reaches its iconographical maturity during the 14th century, though he is usually linked to the Inferno and Judgment Day. Starting with the 15th century, the devil in painting will gradually exit the Inferno, and enter the daily life of the saint, man or in the fight with the archangel in the terrestrial world. His image diversifies, as seen north of the Alps where more and more demons appear under the command of the persecutor of hell. The image of the devil becomes disintegrated in the pictorial representation of man, on the eve of the 16th century. Hieronymus Bosch canvases a new, more complex, social picture of a Western World corrupted by sin, where the authority of the Catholic Church erodes under the auspices of the religious Reformation.

The second part, dedicated to the image of death, is very much linked to the birth of the Purgatory – as a necessary space for the purifying of souls, and as a rescaling of eschatological time – but also to the Black Death of 1348-1350, that has scourged the entire continent, taking away the mere possibility for the population to find a religious justification for the aleatory loss of human lives.

As for the devil, the space in which the eschatological time takes place was best enunciated in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The author himself got inspired by a series of ideas, perpetuated throughout time, most of which being organized inside the religious philosophy of Thomas d'Aquino and his contemporaries. Giotto's expressivity was the first in depicting death as being, not only evocative, but also complex in the representation of a large cumulus of acts related to death. One of these acts is psychostasia – the weighing of souls – conducted in Giotto by Jesus Pantocrator, through a juxtaposition of geometrical technique and hieratic representation. Psychostasia remains on its own niche in Western painting of 14th to 16th centuries. Its presence in works related to the Judgment Day is a sort of *memento mori* for the souls of the sinners and the guidance to the just path, as long as they can still live and change something. There are major differences in representing this act, according to various geographical areas.

I have analyzed the *triumph of death* and the *danse macabre*, along with psychostasia, as I have interpreted hieratism and the symbolic of the acts of dying. We can only see a disconnection from the dramatic and dramatized approach in Andrea Mantegna, who –

surprisingly – succeeds to desacralize death, by painting the Dead Christ, using a photographic technique and almost completely lacking sentiment.

Considering the structure of this thesis, the part about death is a bit atypical, because Mantegna's work of art dates from the 15th and not the 16th century, thus writing a graceful final chapter in the specific iconography. The accomplishment of this painter remained unrepeatable in art history for many centuries to come. Andrea Mantegna managed to transform any future approach of death in a superfluous subject, by canvassing the cold, barren sadness used to depict the passing of Christ.

The third part is dedicated to alchemy, the most complex subject to be discussed in this thesis. I have followed a narrative and scientific storyline, starting with Antiquity until the birth of alchemy in Europe. A subject of this magnitude cannot be taken out of its general historical context, because it stands as a pillar of a world moving forward in parallel with ours. European man owes a lot to the Arab intellectual, who has perpetuated the academic and scientific culture of the Egyptians, the Greeks and the Romans, in an age when Europe was desperately searching for ways to define itself. The slowing down of the migrators' invasions has made it possible for the request for precious and common metals to rise again. However, these metals had become rare with the decline of mining as a consequence of the fall of the Western Roman Empire. The population began to search for new ways to obtain these metals. The constraints forced by the Church, as well as the tumultuous history of the first millennium, have retarded the birth of the European alchemist to the 11th to 12th century.

I have divided European occult sciences into two historical stages. The first one stops in the 15th century, and is mostly focused on the obtaining of the *magnum opus* and the transmutation of metals and substances; the second one goes from the *Ripley Scroll* to the beginning of the 17th century, because now, the primacy belongs to metals no more, but to the sublimation of the soul. Alchemy is the best enunciation of the history of European science, because it has operated in all fields. Alchemists were physicians, physicists, astronomers, astrologists, mathematicians, proto-chemists and philosophers, managing to confer history a more noble and elevated dimension, disconnected from the unfolding of political events.

The part about alchemy was written in a way that the entire theory could be reflected by some of the most important manuscripts that I have talked about: the *Ripley Scroll*, *De Sphaera* and *Splendor Solis*. I have insisted on the latter, because it stands as a coronation of the entire personality of the European alchemist, depicting both spiritual and material sublimation, and intertwining elements from medicine, toxicology, astronomy, astrology and physics. *Splendor Solis* may also be the most musical alchemical work up to the eve of the 17th century, and is by far the most musical painted work in the entire history of alchemy. Michael Maier's *Atalanta fugiens* remains the magnum opus of alchemical sonority, but its emblems are engraved, not painted, and the book was printed in the 17th century.

*

The innovation brought forth by this thesis is first of all the association of the devil with death and alchemy, and the demonstration of their maturity throughout the 14th to 16th centuries in Western Europe. To be able to do this, I was forced to use foreign language books, because, unfortunately, Romanian historiography lacks a lot of bibliography that could have helped me deepen my knowledge on any of the three subjects.

With the devil, I tried to extrapolate the God-devil-man trinomial principle from theology to art and history. I have also tried to demonstrate that the devil is always a prosecutor or bailiff for God, no matter where he resides. I have brought the most visible innovation in the artistic evolution, by demonstrating the maturation of the devil, via his evasion from the Inferno in the world of the humans, and his dissolution in their souls. My argument was that this maturation concludes itself with the death of the devil as an individual character.

The chapter about death innovates with an anthropological analysis of this act, throughout the 14th and the 15th centuries. I also mentioned the 16th century, though this one is somehow irrelevant in my analysis. I insisted a lot on psychostasia, an act that has been almost always neglected or marginalized by historiography. In my thesis, the weighing of souls becomes essential in constructing a discourse about the devil, death and even alchemy. I tried to offer the reader complete, evocative and conclusive examples on how the act of psychostasia takes place and how it evolves.

The last part, being also the largest, innovates by way of analyzing the subject, cumulating alchemical theories from all its Eurasian history, and demonstrating how all of this reflects in *Splendor Solis*. I trust the pages about the alchemical musicality to be a historiographic novelty, not because no one has ever spoken about this (they have), but because no one (from what I could find during my research) has ever treated alchemical music and sonority in resonance with the alchemical processes of transmutation and spiritual sublimation. *Splendor Solis* will find its largest analysis ever in this thesis. I am not the first to have analyzed these illuminations, but until now, the description was always summarily and superficially done, mostly because Salomon Trismosin's text already describes the contents of the painted tablets. The author, however, doesn't explain the process and its signification at all, and I should mention over and over that these illuminations are the decryption of the alchemical message itself. An analysis of these tablets was imperative, though almost inexistent. *Splendor Solis* was almost always disregarded because no one focuses on the meaning of its illustrations, but only on its text, which, dare I say, lacks a notable value. The illuminations are usually appreciated for their aestheticism, not for their cryptology. One of the purposes of my thesis is to change this by analyzing, not only the painted tablet, but its connection with other alchemical or artistic works, to prove the value and great importance *Splendor Solis* has in defining the intellectual personality of the European. The illuminations don't just have an aesthetical value; they are a work of art for associating symbols with music, proto-sciences with color, cryptology with the drama of life, death and resurrection.

My thesis isn't meant to darken the lection with images of a fallen, sad and diabolical world. It stands as a search for light, an attempt to discover hope, to consolidate the primacy of faith and the path from the twilight of death and the devil, to the super-celestial sphere of alchemical wisdom.

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