

Cristina MILOȘ

THE LOOK ON THE DISCIPLE'S FACE

When I first set eyes upon Alessandro Magnasco's painting, I didn't know its title, and many times I found myself striving to identify the face of the man whose denuded chest was being alighted, and also the narrative micro fiction represented by the painter. I could clearly see that the painting represented a biblical scene, but I just couldn't name it.

I could also see the head of the man, but my eyes stopped upon the darkish



shadow of his beard. I, then, turned towards the many parts of the visible specter, and little by little I was able to correlate the "constellation of visual elements", to discover the connections within the "configuration of stimuli"¹ and to trace an interpretation. In other words, I began to focus my wandering sight and "to observe in accordance with him or at the same time with him rather than observe him"². The interpretations I made were influenced by my own emotional and imaginative sensations, and the discourse of interpretation was created by the melting of the one who sees the painting,

¹ Umberto Eco, *Open work*, translation into Romanian by Cornel Mihai Ionescu, published by Paralela 45, Pitesti 2002, p. 158. Where Umberto Eco talks about artistic work which allows the public to make connections between the visible elements, resulting in a large range of interpretation.

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The eye and mind*, translation into Romanian by Radu Negruțiu, published by Casa Cărții de Știință, Cluj, 1999, p. 26.

meaning myself and what I actually see. From this kind of interiority, the value, the light, the colors, the profoundness have all interacted with me and at the same time I interacted with them.

The vertical line on the middle of the painting gathers the characters so that I should not doubt that on the right side is the man who is the essential character, although he is not in the center of the painting. Easy to identify, the man represents Jesus. I could also see two women, the men behind Jesus, the little girl half-hiding behind the pillar, the old man standing on the left side of Jesus and even though vaguely represented, a woman holding a child. At the left side of the painting, another essential character, surprised in the moment of his raising from the grave as the title of Magnasco's painting, "The raising of Lazarus", suggests, is Lazarus, the resurrected.

Next to them, another five men placed in semicircle in the background, and again, a woman holding a child. The horizontal line, traced along the wide-open arms of Lazarus, regroups the characters and emphasizes that Jesus, not only remains the most visible character, although he is not placed in the center of the painting, but he is the only one whose body is straight while all have contorted bodies. The women in the foreground are kneeling, the men in semicircle, behind Lazarus are bended, three of them preoccupied to take Lazarus' body out of the grave, one of them is slightly turned right, frightened by the experience he witnesses, and the one in the background, hardly observable, is missing

the event, being somewhere outside the city. The two men in the background also have contorted bodies.

The narrative fiction that the painting represents is the following: outside the city of Bethany, where Lazarus was buried, Jesus, accompanied by his disciples, rises him from the dead before the eyes of his sisters and a group of Jewish present to weep with them. Thus, the anecdote and the painting reveal the fact that the central characters are Jesus and Lazarus.

The disciple in the right corner points both towards Jesus and Lazarus. Jesus is the powerful one. He indicates his divine origin by his finger pointed towards the source of light, wearing a halo and being the only one standing, from the three persons wearing blue: Jesus, the man who pulls the cerecloth and the woman holding the child. And Lazarus is the one everybody is seeking to touch. His appearance is why the others are so surprised. The central point of the painting is neither Jesus, nor Lazarus, but the old man, placed on the left side of Jesus and his clothing seems to indicate that he is one of Jesus' disciples. But there is something about this old man that is intriguing. Although closer to the foreground as compared with the other two disciples behind the Teacher, whose look is slightly noticeable, the look of this man and the expression on his face are almost entirely dim. The only distinctive marks are the hand, the baldness, the nose and judging from the position of his body, he is looking at the deepness of Lazarus' grave. It is true, he is not the only one looking towards the grave, Jesus

and the man near the two men holding the cerecloth are doing the same thing, the major difference being the movement of their arms. Jesus looks inside the grave, but his right hand points upwards, the young man looks towards the grave and the forefinger towards the two men preoccupied to take Lazarus out of the grave, suggesting that he also helps them, and the old man looks towards the grave and the forefinger is pointed towards himself. He is more preoccupied by the absence of the grave than by the presence of Lazarus. He is the only one who seems to have understood the message. When everybody else is scandalized by the unexpected supernatural appearance of Lazarus, he understands that the emptied grave is a problem that regards him.

But I go further. Traditionally Jewish graves were not subterranean (at least not in that specific period of time). They used to bury the dead in caves covered with a massive stone. We can see that Magnasco's painting does not represent such a grave, nor Lazarus coming out of the grave, alone, or helped by someone from the crowd, when Jesus called him to come out (as presented in the Bible). Moreover, Jesus is not far from the grave, he has one foot hidden and the other one on the edge of the grave. In the painting Lazarus comes out of the grave on the back of a man and pulled by other two. The grave is subterranean and I can notice that

the movement of his feet is identical with Jesus' movement, a foot hidden and the other observable; his open arms resemble a crucified man, his closed eyes pointed upwards, and his mouth open as if he were in great pains. Lazarus makes obvious what is actually absent: the future scene of Christ's crucifixion. Still, the visibility is not total, but kept in a balanced area, an alternation between what I see and what I am not allowed to see. Human nature of Jesus Christ can be seen, while the divine one can only be suggested, induced.

This part is an "obvious" indeterminacy of significance. The gesture of the old disciple, which, in a way, makes us look inside the grave, can also have other connotations. He could have looked towards the grave saying to himself that death is part of his existence too, or maybe he wanted to convince himself that the grave was indeed empty and that it was alright to believe that Jesus was the author of the miracle. Looking in the same direction as Jesus, I tend to believe that he is the only one who got a glimpse of that invisible behind the resurrection of Lazarus.

For the phenomenological understanding, the painting is the best artistic expression that "celebrates the mystery of the visual" and shows, in essence, that "the vulnerable part is the place where the visible and the invisible are tied together"³. This interpretative journey meets this conviction.

³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1969, in translation of Alfonso Lingis, p. XLI.