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The Painting "Confessions" of Nikolay Raynov¹

Abstract

The aim of the following paper is to show that it is not possible to penetrate into the depths of Nikolay Raynov's universe and to comprehend its wholeness, without posing and investigating the question about the origin or the foundation of his various creative occupations, i.e his novels, philosophic and theosophic writings, art history and critique, paintings, decorative design etc. This question is far too complex to be answered briefly without being simplified, and therefore two main directions will be articulated: the reception of Orphism developed in Plotinus' and Porphyry's Neoplatonism – which is the basis of modern Theosophy –, and the synthetic understanding of art, which puts Raynov's views in close proximity to Wassily Kandinsky and Nicholas Roerich.

Keywords: Nikolay Raynov, Art History, Aesthetics, Painting, Culture

The artwork is frequently called the "artist's confession".
But to understand what he wants to tell us,
we have to know his language."
Nikolay Raynov

From the enormous oeuvre of Nikolay Raynov, his paintings seem to be the least known to the public. In the catalogue for his anniversary exhibition in 1939, Nikola Mavrodinov wrote that his contemporaries knew Raynov mostly from the vignettes and the covers of his own books, as well as the publications of Tsvet Publishing House, where he worked as a decorator after the war. Also, that the watercolour paintings, which were exhibited in 1922 in Plovdiv, partly resembled to the Far East paintings, because he took the

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tinest nature forms, such as a leaf, a flower, a blade of grass, and magnified them to achieve a certain effect. In the ornamentations and the predominant fairy-tale elements, Mavrodinov identified the key difference from Far East art, pointing out the essential characteristic of Raynov's watercolours:

He [Raynov] takes a flower – a poppy, a cornflower, a camomile flower, a bellflower or snapdragon – places it in the middle and depicts it stylized so that we are unable to recognize it at first. He preserves only its lasting essence (...) Thus, a new world of nature is created, and in it the forms of nature, which resembles to heraldic signs, return to life. In this world everything is precious, rare, significant and somehow magical. (Mavrodinov 1939, 1)

Besides their similarity to Far East art, Nikolay Raynov's paintings are considered by many as related to the movements of Symbolism, Secession, Impressionism, Expressionism, etc. Probably the noble purpose of these comparisons is to assert that we, Bulgarians, too, had artists who were part of the modern European art movements and even developed them. There is no doubt that in Raynov's literary, philosophical and art history works, as well as in his paintings, one can find different influences from both the East and the West that are worthy to be explored. However, the attempt to put his painting in any conceptual or artistic movement or to qualify it as a specific conglomeration of different styles poses the risk of reductionism and loss of its specificity. Nikolay Raynov's entire work, including his paintings, might perhaps best be characterized by his own words regarding Rimbaud: "He, too – like all creators belonging to the sphere of ingenious uniqueness – cannot be confined to a certain school, just as life failed to confine him to a certain belief, metier, art or vocation" (Raynov 1922, 2).

While for Mavrodinov Nikolay Raynov's paintings seem to be a kind of illustrations to his books, other art experts go even further by emphasizing the "organic connection" (Russev 1974, 5) of Raynov's paintings with his literary works and writings on art history. However, no one is posing the question about the origin of the deep correlation and interaction between all his various creative occupations, which should be a question of priority if one wants to penetrate into the depths of Raynov's universe and comprehend its wholeness. This issue is far too complex to be answered briefly without being simplified. Therefore, I will outline only two directions indicated by Raynov himself: the Orphism developed in Plotinus' and Porphyry's Neoplatonism – which is the basis of modern Theosophy –, and the synthetic understanding of art.

In *History of Plastic Arts*, Raynov refers to the following statement of August Rodin:

The landscape painter sees a reflection of the universal soul not only in the living beings, but also in the trees, the bushes, the valleys and the hills. What to other men is

only wood and earth, appears to the great landscapist like the face of an infinite being. Corot saw goodness scattered over the tops of the trees, over the grass of the fields, over the mirroring water of the lakes. Millet saw there rather suffering and resignation" (Raynov 1939, 29-30).

This is not a casual quotation but one that expresses the metaphysical credo of Raynov himself.

In a concise form Raynov's metaphysical views are presented in his foreword *De Antro Nympharium (On the Cave of the Nymphs)*, where he describes the cosmogony of Orphism and Neoplatonism, containing the doctrine of God as the One – the ineffable First Cause –, the doctrine of the Universe as a macrocosm originating from the original Trinity (Good, Soul and Mind of the World) emanated from God, and the doctrine of the human being as a microcosm "carrying in himself as a potential the essence of the Universe and God" (1920, 8). It should be noted, that the concept of the threefold manifestation of the macro and the microcosm has been supplemented and further developed in modern Theosophy through the doctrine of the seven cosmic planes, the seven planetary systems, the seven cycles, the seven races and subraces, the seven bodies etc., reappropriated by Raynov in his conception of the seven circles of art development.

The Trinity as the initial manifestation of the ineffable God – the inscrutable Enigma of all Enigmas – is the active power that creates the world and imparts spirit into it. According Raynov, it penetrates every particle in order to animate it and empower its further development, "and since the essence of development lies in the gradual accomplishment of perfection, the task of this development consists in the conversion of the hidden potentials into acting powers" (ibid., 14).

According to this emanationist and pantheistic doctrine, the divine is everywhere, even in the so-called "inanimate" nature, in every pebble or rock, but there it is trapped in the coarsest and raw form. In the plant kingdom, the beginnings of consciousness arise, and within the animal kingdom begins the formation of the soul. Yet the power of the divine is most strongly revealed only in the human being. Raynov points out that the Neoplatonists called the human being a "small world" as it possesses a triplicate nature like the creative Trinity, and the purpose of its development is to realize the three aspects of its hidden divine power: "The divinity hidden in man is the driving force that overcomes every obstacle, elevates the spirit ever higher, through an infinite number of forms, in order to unify it with its Source" (ibid., 17).

Raynov's landscapes are an expression of this pantheism, which is described in the *History of Plastic Arts* as follows: "The feeling of pantheistic melting of the Self into nature and fusion with it is the starting point of any landscape art. A painter who did not experi-

ence it, and did not make the viewer also experience it – he failed in his work" (Raynov 1939, 29). An artist, whether a writer or a painter, must in his activity imitate the God-Creator, who has embedded in every outer form an inner idea (Raynov 1920, 22), and should contribute alike to the "consistent improvement of the world" (Raynov 1931, 13).

In other words, with his art, the artist must transform both, the world and the soul of the viewer who contemplates the artwork. This transformation is always symbolic, insofar as the external, visible forms serve as a means of expression of what is inside, hidden and invisible. Therefore, Raynov considers as most relevant Benedetto Croce's definition of art as a vision or an intuition, based on which the artist creates an image. The task of visual art is not to make this image perfect, as an end in itself, but to bring through it the human being and the reality closer to the higher, invisible worlds.

In support of this understanding, Raynov refers to Vladimir Soloviev's concept of the threefold task of art, which is to be a direct objectification of the deepest inner qualities of the vibrant idea that cannot be expressed by the nature, to spiritualize the natural beauty and thus to lead to the immortalization of its individual phenomena.

The supreme purpose of art, therefore, lies in the spiritual transformation of the natural and the human world, and thus in the creation of a universal spiritual organism. The visions and embodiments of the artist, when he is inspired and in line with the development of the universal spirit, i.e. the "creative evolution" (Bergson), are of prophetic nature: "Being aware of the task of the ultimate spiritualization and redemption of the surrounding nature, man is looking for vigorous ways to realize it – in the artworks he prophetically outpaces the future beauty of all things. Therefore in its deepest inner essence every true art is always a prophetic predication of a future event; every true work of art is a tangible depiction of an object or a phenomenon from the point of view of its final state or the future world – which is the same thing" (ibid., 17).

This is the perspective from which Raynov's own paintings are to be viewed, and in particular, his unique compositions in lacquer paint on tin foil, created in the period 1937-1939. It is as though a different world is emanating from them – celestial, ethereal or astral – vested in shimmering colours that change their nuances depending on the angle of contemplation. Fairy-tale plants and trees, birds with glittery feathers and mythical animals enchant the viewer with their glowing beauty, "shining" in the full spectrum of the seven rainbow colours. Shimmering gold, silver, emerald, cobalt, purple tones reflect and direct the light back to the viewer, creating a sense of agility, vivacity, and musicality. It is difficult to identify which are Raynov's favourite colours, because he uses different shades depending on the subject and the mood he seeks to convey. In some of the paintings, the warm and cold tones are in harmony, in others – landscapes in blue or green, night fields

and black skies – the cold colours predominate, and yet in others – landscapes with trees on a background of orange-sienna and yellow-golden skies – the warm colours prevail and embrace all forms. Such colour selection is certainly not accidental, it often carries a deep metaphysical meaning and symbolism in accordance with the theosophical theory of colours.

Some of Raynov's compositions, mainly watercolors and projects for book covers, represent illustrations of his literary works with fabulous plots (*The Prince and the Plague*), parables and visions (*Visions of Ancient Bulgaria*) or philosophical and theosophical books (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra: The Secret Teaching, At the Feet of the Master*). However, they do not have a merely illustrative function. Like his landscapes, they are a constituent part of Nikolay Raynov's global worldview and creative work and, in particular, an expression of his conception of the role of synthesis in art and culture, a conception which is not to be confused with the various synthetic styles and movements in painting².

In the art context, the synthesis, which is a fundamental philosophical and theosophical concept designating, in general terms, the unification of different spiritual elements in a higher whole, is used by Raynov in several aspects. It is put in relation to the creative process, the artwork resulting from it, the perception and evaluation of the work, the connection and interaction between the different arts and, last but not least, the idea of the seventh circle of development of mankind, art and culture, which is called "the age of the future synthesis". The metaphysical basis of Raynov's specific synthesis interpretation is the concept of the threefold nature of the human being as a combination between spirit, soul and body. These three elements play a key role in the creative process. When the painter creates an artwork, the activity involves his entire spirit, soul and senses. Raynov states that this takes place in the form of a struggle between the spirit and the matter, whose purpose is for the artist to imprint on the substance the traits of his inner world, his attitude toward life, his beliefs, his lived experience and a specific spiritual content, by the use of different tools (Raynov 1928, 4-5). In this sense, the artwork may be regarded as the "artist's confession" (ibid., 6). "When the artist paints a landscape, not only he sees the forest in front of him, but he also hears the rustling of the leaves, the murmur of the brook, and the song of the birds, he perceives the smell of the flowers and the cool fresh air, he feels the hardness of the

² Synthetism, as it is well known, is an art style of post-impressionism arising from the synthetic combination of Cloisonnism and Symbolism. Paul Gauguin, Émile Bernard, Louis Anquetin pioneered the style and, opposing Naturalism and Pointillism, tried to express the reality through the synthesis of different images and subjects, conveyed through an approach of symbolic aesthetics. Raynov gives examples of Synthetism found also in New Traditionalism, in Jean-Arp's superrealism, in the decorative-colourful synthesis of Matisse et al. (See Raynov 1939, 91-92, 121, 152).

stone, the roughness of the bark, the tenderness of the flower petals, etc. If he is a very talented landscapist, he will perceive every possible impression, and will convey it indirectly into his painting. Even though the landscape renders directly only the visual images, a viewer will fall under the sophisticated charm of the overall impression of the view. The brush has fused the visible so skillfully that we feel the fragrance of the flowers, the breeze blowing, the air flickering, the pleasant babble of the brook and the whole range of tangible impressions: cracked rocks, hard stones, lush foliage, rough stems, smooth water surface" (Raynov 1947, 6-7).

According to Raynov, sense and mind are two inextricably linked aspects of the artwork perception, but people are more mindful of either the first or the second one, depending on their temper. With the synthetic understanding of the creative process and the artistic insight, Raynov resists, on the one hand, the division, which arises in analytical and abstractionist conceptions, and on the other hand, the rupture between the different approaches of aestheticians and art historians. "One group will contemplate, enjoy and consequently appreciate, while another one will try to get to know, understand and interpret. The first standpoint is maintained by the aestheticians and the second one by the art historians. In the best case, both approaches are united and complemented by talented critics and historians with broader views" (Raynov 1928, 7).

It is no coincidence that Raynov's *History of Plastic Arts* ends with an outline of the future era of synthesis, in which sculpture, architecture, applied arts and painting will be united into an organic whole: "When painting sets to work, it will learn how to build as architecture builds, to vest the skeleton in forms as sculpture does, and will add to what it has learned the fascination of a language full of colours. Thus, all three will be harmonized in it. From its involvement in life, the applied arts will also benefit" (Raynov 1939, 226). This conception is quite similar to Kandinsky's outlook that the specialization of arts must be overcome by a new synthesis that once existed in the Russian Church, where architecture, painting, sculpture, music, poetry and dance formed a united whole (Kandinsky 1927). However, Raynov's synthesis does not only refer to the arts and the science of arts, but also to the realization of a radical change in public consciousness. Only then, the current sixth circle of art will be completed and new genius artists will be born, who will grasp the deep essence of Being and "see the presence of God even in a sand grain" (Raynov 1939, 227).

Revealing and approaching the divine, fabulous and magical world of nature represents a key subject in Raynov's oeuvre, and especially in the paintings shown in this exhibition, but it is not the only one. No less important is the topic of the struggle: the struggle between the spirit and the flesh, between good and evil, beautiful and ugly – themes that are vividly present in his fairy-tales, parables and stories. This is also the fight experienced by

each person with himself, when facing various hardships, and by the artist, pursuing the attainment of perfection. And last but not least, this is the struggle of culture and art to achieve the highest goals of mankind. In 1939, in an anniversary interview on the occasion of his 50th birthday, Nikolay Raynov pointed out that everything he had accomplished was the result of a systematic hard work and constant struggle. Describing the crisis in the late 1930s, which led to the decline of spiritual values and loss of interest in art, he added: "It is this time of struggle and tensions that enables the emergence of militant writers. A true artist will not write for his own sake. His clear conscience will not allow him to remain indifferent to the situation of the nations. He becomes a socially committed writer and, while serving his art, begins to serve the higher causes of humanity" (Raynov 1939b, 1).

The faith in the transforming power of art, and the necessity he felt to serve the supreme human goals, led Nikolay Raynov to his commitment to the Roerich Pact. On his initiative, the Bulgarian Roerich Society was established in 1930. In his article "Roerich and the Struggle for Culture" (1933) he noted:

"One of the main institutions, established by the tireless activist for renewal of humanity, is the Institute of United Arts. On his coat of arms you can clearly see Roerich's motto: "Art will unify all humanity. Art is one – indivisible. Art has its many branches, yet all are one. Art is the manifestation of the coming synthesis; art is for all. Everyone will enjoy true art. The gates of the 'sacred source' must be wide open for everybody, and the light of art will influence numerous hearts with a new love. At first this feeling will be unconscious, but after all it will purify human consciousness, and how many young hearts are searching for something real and beautiful! So give it to them. Bring art to the people – where it belongs. We should have not only museums, theaters, universities, public libraries, railway stations and hospitals, but even prisons decorated and beautified. Then we shall have no more prisons. (Raynov 1933, 335)

From the point of view of 20th century history, and of our actual situation alike, these views might appear fairly utopian, if not naive. Yet Nikolay Raynov was not a mystic closed in himself, nor a quixotic dreamer. He knew very well how to interpret the symbols and codes of Kali Yuga, "the dark age". Hence, the brutally realistic diagnosis he made of our time: the golden ages are gone, there are no more brilliant spiritual leaders, absent is the great creative spirit that might open the gates to the future seventh circle of art (Raynov 1929, 48-56; idem 1939, 227). However, the past does not vanish without a trace. It always leaves trails, guiding signs, vivifying sources from which we can draw inspiration and strength. Whether or not the new age of synthesis will ever come is unknown. It is not that important either. What matters are the "confessions" and the revelations of this forerunner, which are a standing testimony to the fact that another world exists – an ethereal world of

noble beauty and light that opens up to us through his paintings and his reflections on the mission of art and culture.

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