HStud 31(2017)1 125–127
DOI: 10.1556/044.2017.31.1.9

CONTEXTS AND MEANINGS AT THE CULTURAL CROSSROADS

Review by Lajos Somogyvári

János Géczi published his latest monography about the rose (*The Rose and its Symbols IV. Chapters from the 17th and 18th Century*) in 2015 as part of a series describing the history of the plant in a broad context – both in the Hungarian and European background. The main goal of the book (and the previous ones) is to explore an important cultural tradition, patterns of a partly forgotten knowledge about our European roots, beliefs, focusing on the so-called Classical Age (see: Foucault's influential work, *Madness and Civilization*), a period shaped the modern world dominantly.

The rose is a plant connected with the origins of the European civilization (the Middle East and the Mediterranean Basin), and it appeared in the human environment at the earliest recorded stages. To reflect this review's title: the rose has meanings in various fields of knowledge, like medicine, the arts, religious beliefs, myths, literature, the sciences and so on. On the other hand, the diversity of the contexts emerged in the different cultures of Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam, the overlapping and sometimes concurring regions of Eastern and Western Europe, or Northern and Southern area of the continent (to the forming of the specific European culture, see Rémi Brague's work, *Eccentric Culture: A Theory of Western Civilization*).

In the former volumes of the rose-series, János Géczi analyzed three different ages from this perspective – Antiquity, the Christian Middle Ages and the Renaissance – with mostly homogenous images about the rose. In this volume the reader can observe the fragmentation of the traditions, the opposite tendencies of sacralization and profanization. The rose signified traditionally both Jesus and Mary, associated with other ethical and theological meanings, and added the discourses of medicine and the antique Humoral Pathology, in the transition from the Middle Ages to the Humanism and Renaissance. Meanwhile, the paradigm of the natural sciences became more and more relevant in the reception of the rose-images, and the appearance of the flower-gardens meant a new context, the representation. The new book's narrative (the story of the rose in the 17th and 18th century) began after these changes.

A universal plant, the rose affects all of the senses, reflects to the human and sacral sphere – with the different cultural practices of nutrition, hygiene, rituals and medicine. There had been a lot of approaches to this phenomenon: for example, its smell evocates heaven, besides this, the rose cool the air, spiritually and

0236-6568/$20 © Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest

physically touches the body. But this organic attitude, the unity of body and soul, the Sacred and Profane World (Eliade, 1963) was not so clear and simple in the 17th and 18th century, than before. Images of the rose became more and more complex in the modern history: the first change was the before mentioned appearance of flower-gardens and *florilegia*, the latter were illustrated books, a collection of flowers. These marked a new point of view, the botany. Another sample of the abstraction is painting as emblems: word and picture together made the rose as an object of reading, resulted works like *Iconologia*, by Cesare Ripa, a dictionary to the world of symbols. The transformations reflected to the taxonomies of natural sciences, and the same way, reviewed and renewed the traditions.

The next important key question to discuss is the last cultural division in Europe: the duality of Protestantism and Catholicism. In the painting, genres, portraits and still lifes purchased by the protestant bourgeois in North-Western and Central-Europe, until the same dominated by the catholic aristocracy in Southern-Europe. The similarity continues, when we study the allegories of love or the mystic imagery of Mary – both of them signified by the rose, with different religious background (the first is protestant, the second is catholic). Mary and the rose influenced new forms of sacral activities very much: the Rosary, the baroque confessions and pilgrimage express this to the contemporary reader, too.

The literary tradition of those centuries incorporated the texts and images in specific ways and at different levels. The pictorial poetry is the first to mention, connected to the Jesuits and Piarists, with the characteristics of baroque grandeur and monumentality. To counterweigh this, we have to refer to the protestant side, the negative attitude against symbols, idea of the personal belief and the profane rose-imagery during the celebrations. The rose had an emblematic power in these centuries: the word itself evoked the image and sometimes the rose was part of the emblem, connection of texts and images (just like in the pictorial poetry). The mannierism allowed the antique-pagan allusions into the representations again (beside Jesus and Mary), thus emphasized the aesthetic function of the plant (see the fashion of rose crowns). Combination and utilization of the different traditions can be found in the botanical work of János Lippay and the poems of István Gyöngyösi in Hungary. A chapter about the rococo finished the monography: the rose became here the sign of the secret joy, the sin and the moment of happiness, as a possible ending point of the profanization.

References

Brague, Rémi, 2002. *Eccentric Culture: A Theory of Western Civilization.* South Bend: St. Augustine's Press.

Eliade, Mircea, 1963. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion.* New York: Harcourt.
Foucault, Michel, 1988. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason.* New York: Vintage.
Géczi, János, 2015. *A rózsa és jelképei IV. Fejezetek a 17. és 18. századból.* [The Rose and its Symbols IV. Chapters from the 17th and 18th Century]. Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó.

Lajos Somogyvári
assistant lecturer at the University of Pannonia Faculty of Modern Philology and Social Sciences, Teacher Training Centre (Hungary, Veszprém)