



Aesthetics and Philosophy of the Arts

**The Art and Philosophy of Balance
at Constantin Brâncuși**

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Motto: "All dilemmas can be solved by unifying the contraries" (Brâncuși)

ABSTRACT: Our paper intends to be an attempt of making evident the joining of the art and the philosophy of Constantin Brâncuși, the most outstanding representative of sculpture in our century. The way of approaching this topic was suggested to us by the great artist and thinker himself, who urges us that we should not make difficult what he expressed in a simple way. Of course, his multipurpose creation makes our job quite difficult, but we think the effort is worth doing, because in spite of all the limited commentaries, we succeeded in finding out the coherence and the universality of his thinking as well as his capacity of placing himself above the cleatism—heracliticism dispute which is considered as being fundamental for the whole history of art. That is because there exists, and we can speak about a unity of his works in all, based on the solidarity of the forms of his sculpture. As a result, mixing up the formal entities with the deviations from the principles of identity and noncontradiction in the discursive logic, we discover another type of logic in his creation. It is the logic of the metaphorical thinking, of the symbolic thinking based on the principle that anything can be something else in the same moment. This is why the aesthetic commentary, concerned with the modality of the suggestive expression, requires a complementarity of a hermeneutics of the symbol, capable of revealing the intention of the work in its complexity. Therefore, our attempt of considering the symbol of the ovoid as the keystone of Brâncuși's philosophical conception, appears to be verisimilar. That is because, from the archetypal perspective, according to the archaic Romanian philosophy, the egg is just the in-between shape (between the spherical and hourglass, between geometric and biotic, between eleatic and heraclitian); it is the element by which the formal-aesthetic analysis can be unified; it is the synthesis of the opposites and the joy of the equilibrium.

We must admit that to a certain degree all the great artists are also philosophers, at least by emerging the philosophical thought through their works. The truth of this statement proves to be real with Constantin Brâncuși the greatest representative of the 20th c. sculpture. Thus, as far as many critics are concerned, they are fully convinced that the shapes of the works of Brâncuși have a sublime artistic value because of their philosophical expression.

Despite this, taking Constantin Brâncuși as both an artist and a philosopher may stir up spirits among aestheticians. We should not forget that this idea is imposed by evidence that

on discussing Brâncuși's artistic works, a unique philosophical commentary is also implied. Besides, his genius has given the world of the old ideas and universal truth a new light, has brought the myths to the contemporary thinking and acceptance by shaping them in new spiritual forms.

So, we witness the tendency of turning art towards intellectual bias on the one hand, and to sensual dimensions. So, from an epistemological perspective we should not consider any more a serious limitation between the artistic knowledge and the philosophical one.

Actually, it is about a real concern of modern culture for ontology and implicitly for gnoseology, concern that was fully characteristic to Constantin Brâncuși. Starting from this obvious cultural reality, we are going to focus on the main philosophical ideas that make Brâncuși's genial sculpture. We are doing this without any personal vanity, but with the pride of Being Romanian, thinking about the gain which the philosophy of art gets by using these ideas.

The way of our acting is suggested by the great artist and thinker himself who committed himself upon the idea that what is genial is simple either. Even his pieces of work warn us against looking at them tired of everyday routine of living, but setting us free for a while, so that we could have elevated feelings, taste the flavour of the rest, step in the vibrating silence of contemplation. That's because the core of perfection is revealed by Brâncuși in profoundness. The lyrical facets of his works invites the admirer to the philosophical agora of his ideas. One cannot penetrate the universe of this great artist unless one gives up vanity. Simplicity taken out from profound ideas and messages leads us to innocence and spiritual heights.

1. Mention should be made that most critics resort to notorious philosophical doctrines, either old or modern, but most of the time heterogeneous ones in commenting upon his works. Though these hints do not take in view his art as a whole complete system of thinking, they could not be neglected either.

So, let's have in view the sculptures that are part of the town environment—*The Endless Column*, *The Gate of the Kiss* and *The Table of Silence* by which the artist and the philosopher marked the relationship between his native town and the universe.

The Endless Column, about which Ossip Zadkine says that "it will stay as the symbol of the thought that wants to get free from mediocrity and get higher at the heights of philosophy" (1)—summarize more comments of many critics that consider the Endless Column either a form with folkloric roots, or, the symbol of life, or that of death, or the representation of a philosophical abstraction.

Settled on an area which is very familiar to myths, art and philosophy, *The Endless Column* has become a national and universal symbol in which the conception about the endlessness merges with the idea of time and space cyclicity. Just as Mircea Eliade stated before, Constantin Brâncuși's sculpture represents the image of the world axis (*Axis Mundi*), which is a theme found in prehistoric Romanian folklore.(2) By connecting the Earth with the Heaven, *The Endless Column* inspires trust in the correctness and in the profoundness of human thinking and in the endless succession of cyclicity. When contemplating it one surely aspires towards perfection, feels the thirst for the absolute, sets himself free and experiences the feeling of self-trust and the joy of being part of nature. So the philosophy of *The Endless Column* is one of balance, of serenity so common with the Romanian way of thinking meant to connect the East World with the West.

The Gate of the Kiss placed in his native town—Tg.Jiu—Stands for the theme symbol mentioned above and for the artist's understanding of reality α art.

The critics interpret this piece of art either as a country gate or as a representation of the wedding or of death or, as a philosophical abstraction.

A noticeable fact is that *The Gate of the Kiss* is the only piece of work until then with decorated surfaces which stands for its folkloric roots. This does not mean that the work has no philosophical connotation. Watching carefully the works of this series we can see that there is an ever deeper stylistic evolution of expressiveness and a simplification of the forms to such an extent that the two eyes at *The Gate of the Kiss* have become only one under the form of a circle. In this case the message belongs to essence. Referring to the work "*The Kiss*" in 1907 the artist says: "Actually I didn't mean to make a sculpture that could symbolize one certain couple, but, to symbolize all couples that have ever loved on this earth, I mean the idea of a loving couple."⁽³⁾

Sidney Geist one of the most famous expert on Brâncuși's works comments upon *The Gate of the Kiss*; "The theme of this work is love α communion supported by sexual energy. The circular motif from the column meet the high curved surfaces, from beneath the lintel in order to create a magic image of united male α female genital organs. The surfaces are curved to the interior parts and the jut of the splitted circle from above could be interpreted as the repeated movements when having sex."⁽⁴⁾

Together with other critics Sidney Geist appreciates *The Gate of the Kiss* an extreme stylization of this motif and the result of a serious effort in thinking, after a long series of elaborate versions, a real philosophical expression in art of our century. As a support to the above mentioned ideas is the fact that the artist's conception about love is preserved with an area of a great archaic beauty, where nature and good sense formed a balance of the necessary but compensating asymmetries.

The stylization of the eye, actually of the two eyes together symbolizes the looks of both, (eyes or the two individuals of the couple) united in a perfect sphere that suggests eternal, love, an imaginary bridge between forgetfulness and happiness projected into future. Though less frequently talked about by the critics, *The Table of Silence* suggested many interpretations α symbols: first a country feeding table, then the symbol of family, the wedding dinner, or a funeral feast and at last but not at least a philosophical symbol. The aestheticians appreciate this work as an opportunity or a modality to show the manifestation of constructivism in art as it was conceived at the turning of our century—useful domestic objects. Sidney Geist was the critic that revealed the philosophical dimensions of *The Table of Silence*. He wrote: "The table with the 12 chairs could be interpreted as a cosmic centre surrounded by its satellites just as the sun and the twelve months, or as the signs of the zodiac, or as Jesus Christ and his Apostles, or the symbol of family—mother and the children etc. ..."⁽⁵⁾

The Table of Silence is the symbol of harmony, its main dimension being the silence as a sign of, nonconflict, of solidarity, equality α balance. Being a metaphor, the message of *The Table of Silence* could sound like this: "People can see the world as a fatal pyramid; and they crowd inside to reach as high as they can—for which they harm each other and feel very miserable ... It would be better if people could live horizontally just like leaves of grass."⁽⁶⁾

2. Now, we should have in view more important critical issues that demonstrate that the artist's work is conceived on a solid philosophical basis, having a real, well expressed theory. This versatile aspects of Brâncuși's artistic creation makes, more difficult a profound and complex study of his sculpture and of the philosophy that on which his creation is grounded. Most of the critics were concerned with the manner in which movement and evolution are two important elements in his creation. Ion Pogorilovski

writes" ... many people associate Brâncuși's art to Greek vision & conception; many other people claim to be an outcome of heraclitean philosophy."⁽⁷⁾

Referring to Brâncuși, Mircea Deac writes: "He saw people, nature, society, the universe as being static isolated elements—He analysed them with a metaphysical eye, without any concordance between them. Brâncuși did not conceive movement as being as essence of reality, of nature and society—he did not notice the permanent transformation of nature, of society, and, he did not understand the contradictions that determine movement and transform the world."⁽⁸⁾ So much the same writes Mihai Tarangul: "What nature never finishes, becomes complete, finished in Brâncuși's works. This works are free of any constraints. They are hanging in a permanent balance without any support."⁽⁹⁾

On the other hand, Brâncuși is considered a creator concerned with the heraclitean theory of movement, of flight and evolution. Stressing almost the same idea, Rene Huyghe notices that Brâncuși's art is much concerned with revealing the core of life, its essence, the energy.

He goes on writing "this sculpture could not help pointing this amazing vitality, this tremendous energy; and Brâncuși seems to be a forerunner among the artists in this respect. He did not limit himself like Carpean or Rodin to express the static element by designing the movement; much more than that he expresses the generating principle of the movement"⁽¹⁰⁾ It is worth remembering that Brâncuși himself placed in his studio in Paris several pieces of sculpture on rotating stands which enjoyed face in his time. They say that the artist thought of setting even *The Endless Column*. So could we categorize Brâncuși's sculpture as being eleatic or heraclitean? We suppose we could not. Because the permanent endeavour of the artist who is a philosopher at the same time, was to reveal the movement, the evolution, the tendency to give up the "static" elements of sculpture.

Being at the same opinion, Eugen Schileru writes: "The coincidence of the opposite elements, the air of being both eleatic and heraclitean at the same time, of supreme peace have never gone better together with the impression of fluidity than in Brâncuși's work."⁽¹¹⁾ The Romanian philosopher Constantin Noica writes a more competent critical paper on Brâncuși's creation: "... for the country Boy from Hobița, sculpture is no more the art of the humans, but , it is a strange evolution, becoming, which we could identify as being an evolution towards life. Exactly as according to the Romanian concept of being, the artist makes in such a way that the nonmovement in his creation is shaking. Ever since Plato's time they thought of a reconciliation between Parmenide and Heraclit but this reconciliation meant compromises on both sides. Symbolically Heraclit is one and the same with Parmenide even if, historically they were opposed; and Brâncuși does not say about all these, he just lays it in front of our eyes."⁽¹²⁾

Referring to geometrical (abstract), or biotic (dedicated to vitality) forms in his sculpture, being either spheric or under the form of hourglasses critics appreciate all these as being a serious matter in itself that requires special research.

For a better understanding of these assumptions we should not forget that Brâncuși expressed his philosophy in artistic works, in the language of forms though he wrote a few aphorisms. That is why his artistic creation is supposed to be enjoyed and understood "only if we give up the false superficial manner of logic conscience which may lead to misunderstanding."⁽¹³⁾

A famous philosopher of culture, Wilhelm Warringer states that the artistic emotions and estetic experience have a dual characteristic: "on the one hand we have the tendency to abstractionism and on the other hand the instinct of intropaty."⁽¹⁴⁾ In these terms the sculpture of Brâncuși is situated beyond all disputes and artistic movements. Jack Burnham appreciates that a series of Brâncuși "works are very representative by being both

geometric and biotic." (15) Therefore we should be very analytic when having in view Brâncuși's philosophy in order to be able to decipher the message of his artistic forms, to be able to hold the key of his art.

The unity of Brâncuși's art consists in the unity of the forms of his creation. Because the artist has forms of his creation. Because the artist has his own logic according to which everything can be at the same time anything else. Or this metaphysical thinking was wonderfully transposed in his sculpture.

So, when studying modalities in fine arts, we have to study the hermeneutics of the symbol which can reveal the message of the artistic creation.

Brâncuși advice: "unite write all forms in only one and make it alive" (16) has become a main point for all critics that wanted to search a generic form for all his works. In 1921, Ezra Pound wrote: "I really don't know how to interpret these ovoid forms of Brâncuși with the rest of his creation, but I say that these may be the key to the world of artistic form." (17)

We would say that we could interpret in the same manner the egg, as being a key of the artist's philosophy in itself. The egg is an intermediate form between spheric and hourglass forms typical to archaic Romanian and culture; between the geometric and biotic elements, between eleatic and heraclitean; it is the element by the help of which one can reunite the formal-aesthetic analysis and the philosophical hermeneutics; it is the synthesis of the contraries, it's the joy of balance.

3. To conclude, Brâncuși "belongs", as Carola Giedion-Welcker puts it, "to both eastern sensitiveness and thinking and to the mediteranean one." (18) The philosophy of his art drives us towards the impulse of destroying the forces that annihilates vitality, towards our tendency of synchronizing our self with the universe, towards harmony, serenity, wisdom and joy. Brâncuși transmits into the language of modern people a very old philosophy just as Giulio Carlo Argan says: "Brâncuși is first of all a philosopher in the most proper sense that word used to have in antiquity." (19)

In his aspiration towards world /universal harmony, he fed on the sap of the ancestral thinking of the Romanian people. Prehistoric art is enlarged with new echoes and meanings, with new motifs having international echoes. Brâncuși's artistic creation is founded on constant moral values: balance, a profound sense of boundaries and selfpeace. Just as Brâncuși said: "Romanian country people know very well what is good and what is wrong. Their moral values are inscribed in proverbs, traditional customs and old wisdom." (20)

Notes

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(4) Geist, Sidney - *Brâncuși - Sarutul*, Meridiane Publishing House, Bucuresti, 1982, p.74

(5) Geist, Sidnei - *Brâncuși, A Study of the Sculpture*, Grossman Publishers, New York, 1968

- (6) Zrnescu, Constantin - *Aforismele [i textele lui Brâncusi* - Scrisul românesc Publishing House - Craiova 1980, p.166 - 167
- (7) Pogorilovski, Ion - *Comentarea capodoperei*, Junimea Publishing House, Ia[i, 1976, p.144
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- (11) Schileru, Eugen - *Constantin Brâncusi*, in volume - *Scrisoarea de dragoste*, Meridiane Publishing Haouse, Bucure[ti, 1971, p.155
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- (13) Paleolog, V.S. - *Sculptorul Brâncusi*, in *Arhivele Olteniei*, 92-94, 193
- (14) Worringer, Wilhelm - *Abstrac]ie [i intropatie*, Univers Publishing House, Bucure[ti, 1970, p.23
- (15) Burnham, Jeack - *Beyond modern sculpture*, Edited by George Braziller New York, 1969, p.314
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- (17) Pound, Erza - *Brâncusi*, `n *The Little Review*, VIII, 1, Autum Nunber, 1921
- (18) Giedion-Weleker, Carola - *Constantin Vrâncusi*, Meridiane Publishing House, Bucure[ti, 1981, p.53
- (19) Filip, Nicu - *Dialog cu "G.C.Argon despre Brâncusi"* - `n *Luceaf[rul*, 45, 1967, Bucure[ti
- (20) Zarnescu, Constantin - *Aforismele si textele lui Brâncusi*, Scrisul Romanesc Publishing House, Craiova, 1980, p.151