The Thanatology of Hope
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When confronted with an oxymoron like the title “The Thanatology of Hope,” the reader will probably think that it suffers from a referential uncertainty: the words seem to work separately, creating an ambiguous and unconvincing fusion of the two. Furthermore, in our culture death and hope seem to exclude each other (hope dies last!). This is why the cemetery is perceived as a place of sorrow and loss which annihilates any discourse of hope, a topos where one thinks that Death was the end of the hopes of the unfortunate inhabitants of the necropolis.

By introducing the concept of the heterotopic space, Michel Foucault enables us to escape from the rigid frame of the conventional time and the phenomenology of death because, as he points out, the cemetery, as a typical heterotopic space: it “represents, reinterprets and re-models the relationship of a person to nature.”

This relationship is linked to the total break with the conventional time in which we are living, producing what Foucault qualifies as heterochronies, another undeniable proof of the complete annihilation caused by death.

Based on the capacity of the heterotopic space of the cemetery to “display, contest and inverts social relationships,” we would like to widen the concept of the heterotopic space including the Martyrs’ Cemeteries of the National Liberation War which at the time of communist Albania were build in almost every town. The heterotypic quality of these spatio-temporal enclosures combined with their highly complex and ambiguous relationships challenges, beside others, the positivist belief of the Marxist dogma that we live in a unique and homogeneous space. Precisely in the process of the creation of heterotopic spaces we will try to find the potentiality of hope, optimism, and belief in the bright

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2 Ibid.
future of the communist society generated by the typology of the Martyrs’ Cemetery. They were not only conceptualized as a *memento mori*, a space that “re-models the relationship of a person to nature,” but mostly as a space generating a remarkable educational potential through the evocation of the recent past.

I still remember the collective visits with my schoolmates from elementary school every May 5th, the Day of the Martyrs, at the Cemetery of the National Martyrs in Tirana. Although, as we just mentioned, according to popular view the cemetery is a gruesome and frightful place, especially for children, we really enjoyed being there. We strolled around the narrow paths between the graves, looking curiously at the photos of the martyrs, reading their names aloud and then trying to capture grasshoppers and butterflies for our insect collection. Finally, tired, we sat down to listen patiently to the stories of a war veteran about the sacrifices of the martyrs and the deep gratitude we owed to them for the peaceful and happy childhood we enjoyed. At the end, as usual, we answered loudly and affirmatively to the question of our teacher whether, if needed, we would give our life, as the martyrs had done, for Fatherland and Party.

The heterotopic space of the Martyrs’ Cemetery, the impressive visual impact of the huge monument, the stories of the veterans, were all aimed to spatialize the memory, to create “another space,” transcending “the here and now” by connecting the glorious past with the bright future in order to create an “elsewhere” in an attempt to plant in our simple minds the axiomatic belief that the road to the happy future was paved with the sacrifices of the martyrs and that in similar historical situations we ought to act in their example defending the fatherland and socialism. The Martyrs’ Cemeteries were part of the national education system, aiming to promote the values of a person to nature, but mostly as a space generating a remarkable educational potential through the evocation of the recent past.

In order to discover the potentiality of hope in the heterotopic space of a graveyard, we chose the Martyrs’ Cemetery of Përmet (ALS–244) and the monument entitled *Shokët* (*The Comrades*) by the well-known sculptor Odhise Paskalë placed inside its space (fig. 1).

Inspired by a secular religion such as the communist dogma, the Albanian regime based education on the emphasis on sacrifice and gratitude. But this was in no way their invention. Surprisingly, the atheist regime borrowed the concept of the thanatology of hope from the art of their fierce enemy, the Christian Church which since the early Christian art of the Roman catacombs used them to promote the hope of salvation in the cemetery of the Christian martyrs. Among many others, a significant example is the painted ceiling of a cubiculum in the Catacomb of Saints Peter and Marcellinus in Rome.

The lunettes in this Early Christian cubiculum contain the key episodes from the Old Testament story of Jonah, a popular figure in Early Christian painting and sculpture, especially in funerary contexts. The Christians honored him as a prophetic forerunner of Christ, who rose from death as Jonah had been delivered from the belly of the sea monster also after three days.¹

The custom to use the potentiality of hope of a cemetery may have originated in the use of the painted cubicula situated in the network of tunnels containing bodies of dead Christians for regular memorial services and celebrations of the anniversaries of Christian martyrs starting from the official status of the Christian faith at the 4th century CE.

The Jacobins were the first modern secular regime that understood the potential of the heterotopic space of the cemeteries to produce also the thanatology of hope. Jacques-Louis David, the first revolutionary artist, was not only convinced of the educational value of monumental sculpture, but to him the numerous monuments placed at the cemeteries to honor the heroes of the French Revolution were effective places for the education of the young generations with the highest values of abnegation and sacrifice. Our visits during elementary school were in line with this ancient tradition originating from the early times of the Christian faith.

**The formal resemblance with the Pietà**

From the rational organization of the conventional space of the Martyrs’ Cemetery in Përmet it becomes clear that its epicenter is the Odhise Paskalë’s *Shokët*. The thanatological discourse of hope is enhanced by the obvious and stunning resemblance of the compositional schema of the monument with the Christian subject of the *Pietà*. The altar itself, on which the sculptural group is standing, is similar in form and function to the structures erected by stone blocs which for centuries served as sacrificial places for many cultures to soothe the gods to bestow on men their grace and rewards. Through his resemblance to Christ, the agonizing partisan who sacrifices his youth on the altar of freedom and future, by its resemblance with Christ, draws a clear parallel that his death too will bring hope and salvation to the others.

From the two variants of the *Pietà* (Mary keeping the Son on her lap) and the lamentation of the dead Christ

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by Mary and other witnesses the author of the monument chose the last one. If in the composition of the first variant the tension created by the horizontal lifeless body of Christ and the vertical ascent of the triangular composition meeting at the head of Mary forebodes his Ascension to Heaven, the second variant of the Pietà (with witnesses) underscores the sorrow for the death of Christ through its horizontal organization. The sculptural group “The Comrades” contains a well-known feature of the classical and neoclassical mortuary monuments: the synthetic frontal representation – typical only to painting – which allows to the spectator to observe the monument only from a single frontal stationary perspective, an obligatory concept because these kind of public sculptures are usually placed in front of a flat vertical plane. Although the monument in Përmet is conceived as a round sculpture, it adheres to the same principle. We realize this fact if we try to escape from its frontal perspective: moving to the left we see the back of the girl (aesthetically unpleasant), while passing to the right we miss the face of the agonizing partisan (the meeting point of all energy lines of the sculptural group).

The heterotopic space of the monument generated by the specular and speculative play of spaces is created by the compositional scheme which is at the same time real and utopian. The combination of the three triangles (the three bodies of the characters) inscribed inside a pyramidal form emphasizes the phenomenological quality of the event if the side wings will be stretched to meet somewhere up above the figures. This is probably the reason why the author has removed the “top” of the pyramid, typical for the first variant of the Pietà choosing for the scheme of the horizontal organization of the event. By a careful examination it becomes obvious that the meeting points of the monuments energy lines is the portrait of the partisan (fig. 2), the place where we find the main element of the specular play of spaces: the gaze through the half-closed eyelids directed upwards as if looking at an epiphany that only he can see in his last moments, an ideal utopian space consecrated by the unconditional hope for the communist future. The head of the agonizing partisan leaning to one side is maintained carefully by his comrade standing behind him, while his portrait with a slightly open mouth resembles the frozen masque of the face of the dead Christ that we often find in the religious visual art of the same subject. The classic spirit of the modeling of the portrait fully complies with the iconographic representation of Christ’s Pietà. There is a stunning the resemblance of the partisan’s portrait with the well-known portrait Ecce Homo by the prominent baroque painter Guido Reni (1575–1642) creating multilayered meanings of the dialectic of death and salvation, death, future, and hope (fig. 3).

The heterotopic quality of the space is further accentuated by the gestures of the other characters.

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**Fig. 2** Portrait of the dying partisan, detail of the sculptural group Shokët.

**Fig. 3** Guido Reni, Ecco Homo (1640, oil on canvas).
Through her curved back the partisan girl not only makes us feel the heavy burden of the grief, but her head bent over her comrade’s hand directs our attention to the hand of the agonizing partisan, reminding us of the familiar image of the woman which in the artistic depictions of the Pietà (usually Mary Magdalene) holds the hand of Christ, looking compassionately at the wound of the nail in his palm, which after the thirteenth century, with the stigmata of St. Francis will receive a special significance in Christian iconography. Surprisingly the girl repeats the same gesture; as if even she too sees “the wound caused by the crucifixion” in the hand of her comrade which she is holding with the same compassion as Mary Magdalene (fig. 4).

**Organic body – political body**

“In any case, there is a certain thing, that the human body is the principal actor of all utopias” ⁴ says Foucault, pointing out the fact that signifying is not a function that we add to our body. “The basic feature of the body, linked to its fundamentally signifying nature, is to move places, operating always shifts through which we are never only here. ⁵ The heterotopic interrelation of spaces created by the context (the cemetery) and the text (the monument) is based mainly on the dialectic of the visibility and the invisibility of the human body.

The moribund partisan has two bodies, one organic, which as Foucault points out, is divisible and functional because it is related to a visible and identifiable *topos* in the space, its own weight and mass while imposing on us the visual presence typical for the material body. The organic bodies of the comrades of the dying partisan have the same quality related to the conventional

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⁵ Ibid.
space. Through their postures and behavior, as we just mentioned, they are part of the phenomenology of the situation and create, from a topological point of view, a clear and isolated real space. But differently from them the agonizing partisan seems to transcend the conventional space, having a “body” from which “all possible places, real and utopia, emerge and radiate.”6 His political body created by the sacrifice and the clear parallel to the passion of Christ (the partisan too is innocent; he is giving his life for the happiness of the others in name of hope and salvation that his death will bring). The official propaganda kept the same spirit in the art related to the martyrs. Just to mention one case, in one well-known popular song of the time we find verses like “Your blood became light!” which contains obvious religious connotations.

The essence of the political body of the partisan is its status of martyr. Strictly speaking, the word martyr originates from the Greek martyr, marturia, marturon and martyrë, which are usually part of the legal jargon having the meaning of witness, someone called to give evidence before a secular court. In philosophical language, this word has a very ambiguous meaning which Aristotle describes as follows: “Testimony about an event watched closely, that can be linked to truths the speaker is quite convinced, truths that might be a manifestation of moral convictions.” 7 In the early fifth century, seeing that the term martyr had lost its original meaning, Saint Augustine reminded his Roman contemporaries: “There are among us brothers who do not know the Greek language, which do not realize that this Greek word is translated witness.”8 Isidore of Seville says the same thing: “They are called martus in Greek and testis in Latin because they suffer and have suffered for their faith in Our Lord, Jesus Christ and fought to the end for the Truth.”9 In Albanian, the term martyr has the same root. The word dëshmor (martyr) derives from dëshmitar (witness). Even the word shahit, borrowed from Arabic, widely used for nearly five centuries under the Ottoman occupation, had the same double meaning of witness and martyr.

All started when the day of his Ascension, Jesus left his apostles saying: “[...] and you will be my martyrs” (Gr. kai esethë mou martures, Acts 1:8).10 For the apostles, this announcement had nothing tragic, because at that time, the Greek word martyrs meant only witness, but when they had to sacrifice their lives to legitimize the authenticity of their witnessing, submitting to the extreme test of martyrdom, the apostles discovered its new meaning. After the first Christian martyr, Stephen, the deacon of the Church of Jerusalem was stoned to death defending the name of Jesus, the word witness received a new meaning – that of “witness to the death.” “Christian martyrs followed their Lord’s example. They saw Christ as the Martyr par excellence, the faithful and true witness,”11 who, after announcing his message proclaimed in a language that is universally understandable and unambiguous delivered his organic body to martyrdom. The evolution of the meaning of martyrs shows what the distinguishing feature of the martyr is: the evidence on something sublime that others fail to see or feel whose value is more precious than life itself.

The partisan too is giving his organic body to testify his faith in the becoming of the future communist society. But his political body, which, as we know is invisible, eternal, indivisible, made visible only through action, sacrifice, gestures which project our attention to other spaces. “But perhaps the most obstinate, the most powerful of those utopias with which we erase the sad topology of the body has been since the beginning of the western history supplied to us by the great myth of the soul” says Foucault. His political body, which curiously has all the characteristics of the soul – indivisible, invisible and eternal – brings a metaphysical concept into a public monument of the atheist art of socialist realism.

By his act of sacrifice the partisan’s political body accomplishes a passage, a kind of bridge to another utopian space creating two spaces: one real, phenomenological (the here and now) experienced by the characters and the utopian space (the elsewhere) created by the political body of the partisan.

The author has respected the unwritten taboo of socialist realism on mentioning the death of the organic body of the hero, by avoiding the presentation of physical death. Through its energy lines the iconographic composition of the sculptural group does not emphasize the dead partisan (his organic body), but the death of the partisan (the political body). The organic body of the partisan is “an irremediable here and now,”12 opposed to any utopia because it stands, as if in a rite of passage, at the liminal space of agony between life and death, under the cures and attention of his comrades. If his organic

8 Ibid., p. 148.
9 Ibid., p. 142.
10 John Yang, Christianity (London: Hodder Stoughton, 1999), p. 89.
body will soon perish after being involved in the “last fight”\textsuperscript{13} his political body, like the soul will transcend his death bringing hope and salvation. With the victory of the revolution, the punishment of injustices, the disappearance of private property, source of all evils according to Marx, the disappearance of the classes in the ideal communist society will, by consequence, eliminate class struggle, the cause of endless wars and suffering for the dominated layers of the human society.

The context of the heterotopic space of the martyrs’ cemetery, the resemblance with the well-known theme of the Pietà and the significant parallels drawn in such case, the specular play of spaces created by the portrait and the look of the agonizing partisan, the postures and the gestures that transcend his organic body into the political body, and all this in contrast with the phenomenological real space created by the bodies of the two other partisans, inscribe the martyrs’ cemetery and the monument in question into an ancient tradition where the dialectic of death and hope, unusual as it may sound, is able to create a typical religious discourse which, after being appropriated by the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, including the Albanian regime, gave to some of their official artworks the aura created by the thanatological discourse of hope. Thus, the monument Shokët is a clear testimony of the presence of the religious connotations in the atheist art of Albanian socialist realism.

\textsuperscript{13} Eugène Pottier, \textit{The Internationale}: “So comrades, come rally, / And the last fight let us face. / The Internationale, / Unites the human race.”