The Road as a Metaphor of the Sacred Grammar in the Autobiography of Paisius Velichkovsky

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Paisius Velichkovsky è uno dei piú grandi nomi della cultura monastica del XVIIIesimo secolo. Nato a Poltava, nel Impero Russo, sceglie una vita di monaco da giovane. Il suo percorso biografico è poi, un vero, infaticabile e coraggioso pellegrinaggio, che lo porta sul territorio russo, greco e romeno e lo fa diventare uno dei piú famosi abati, eruditi e traduttori. Al monastero di Neamts, organizza una comunitá multinazionale e poliglotta di 800 monaci, per quali scrive la sua Autobiografia. Questo manoscritto, tanto controverso quanto importante, ha un valore storico, letterario e pedagogico incontestabile, che lo iscrive fra le grandi opere dedicate ai giovani dei tutti tempi.

Parole- chiave: Paisius, Velichkovsky, Neamts, Autobiografia, cultura monastica.

Paisius Velichkovsky is a name of huge importance for the history of Church as well as for the history of culture. In spite of his tormented life, that has been an endless pilgrimage on the Russian, Greek and Romanian land, under the troubled circumstances of the numerous XVIIIth century Russian-Turkish wars, he managed to fulfil an overwhelming mission as a monk, a priest, an abbot, a self-made scholar and a refined translator, a capable teacher and an extremely efficient organizer of school. His life and work gave a start to a whole religious and cultural rebirth on the national territories of the Eastern Church, known in history by the name of the Philokalic Awakening, a spiritual wave that has reached by its radiant influence even most famous names of thinkers and creators of the XIXth century, such as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. At more than two centuries after his death, the paisian legacy is still a treasure to be discovered by all the believers, translators and teachers around the world.

A pilgrims' destiny

Born in 1722, in Poltava, on the territory of a Ukraine split at that time between the Russian Empire and Poland and thus, between the Eastern Russian Church and the Catholic Polish one, Paisius Velichkovsky is the eleventh child of a Ukrainian family with a long tradition in Orthodox priesthood. The family is devastated by numerous child deaths that come one after another, leaving him as unique survivor and inheritor of the priesthood legacy that the

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Velichkovsky name holds in the sacred Cathedral of Poltava. For this reason, in 1734, at the age of twelve, he finds himself as a pupil studying theology in the Academy of Kiev. After years of numerous readings and hard work, Paisius comes to the conclusion that the Academy has by far abandoned the true spirit of the Orthodox Church, the sense of authentic living in Christ , placing in the foreground of the curriculum the philosophycal and rationalistic values, rather specific to the Western Church.

Thus, in 1739, at the age of seventeen, he simply flees from the Academy and starts a life of pilgrimage , finding refuge in the monasteries on both shores of Dnipro river: Liubetski, Medvedovski, Lavra Pecerska. Many of the sacred Ukrainian Orthodox monasteries close down under the order of the Polish Catholic authorities, so young brother Paisius finds neither the peace of mind and soul, nor the spiritual master he is looking for, and that gets him to the decision of leaving his fatherland and own people for good.

In 1742, at the age of twenty, he becomes a refugee again by crossing, in secrecy, the border towards Romanian horizons. Here, he will live the most peaceful four years of his live, in the region of Vrancea-Buzău[1], between walls of mountain and monastery, at Dălhăutsi, Trăisteni and Cîrnu. In these Romanian sacred places, he will soon very well learn Romanian and get acquainted with the basic values and techniques of hesychasm. It is also here, that he will learn about the Sacred Mount Athos and all the valuable manuscripts held in the monastic libraries there.

It is perhaps, for this very reason that he feels irresistibly attracted to the sacred places of Athos, for which he sets off in 1746, at the age of twenty-four. The next seventeen years of his life he will be spending living in different hermitages of the Sacred Greek Mount and leading a personal quest for self-refinement in spirit, as well as in erudition. In time he becomes a monk, then a priest and an abbot for a community of sixty-eight monks, he learns Greek and keeps searching for the Byzantine original manuscripts of the patristic Orthodox tradition. Due to the huge taxes imposed on all the monastic communities of Athos by the Turkish authorities, abbot Paisius thinks of departing once more, this time together with all his monks and all the manuscripts he could find, towards the only place that has ever offered him the peace he had always searched for: the Romanian Countries.

The last thirty-one years of his life, he spends in Moldova, in the holy monasteries of Dragomirna, Secu and finally, Neamts. At Neamts, beginning with 1779, he organizes a multinational and polyglot monastic community of over 800 monks, including Romanians, Russians, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, Serbians, Greeks, Albanese and even, baptized Jews. With their help, he founds

[1] The Romanian mountainous region of Vrancea-Buzău holds a hesychastic tradition that goes back to the XIVth century and continues uninterrupted until mid XVIIIth century, when young Paisius gets there. For more details, see the study of D. Stăniloae, *Din istoria isihasmului în ortodoxia română*, in *Filocalia*,tome VIII, p. 553-588, IBM, Bucureşti, 1979.

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a School for Translators that he runs himself, with the purpose of translating the Byzantine manuscripts brought from Athos, from Greek into both Slavonic and Romanian, of making handwritten copies of the translations and of spreading them all over the national territories of the Eastern Church, especially over Romanian and Russian lands. This happens indeed, during the last fifteen years of Paisius' life (1779-1794) and it is exactly this unique School for translators and its outcome that makes out of Neamts monastery, the acknowledged radiating center of spirituality for the whole Orthodox Church towards late XVIIIth century. The most impressive and massive translation ever realized in this school is the Slavonic version of Philokalia (the basic collection of patristic learnings of the Eastern Church) that abbot Paisius himself keeps working on and manages in the end, to see it done and even printed in Sankt Petersburg, in 1793, just one year before his death.

Towards the end of his life, the abbot of Neamts, surrounded by his beloved disciples and books, decides to write his *Autobiography,* with the declared purpose of giving an authentic testimony about the events of his life and of offering a long-lasting support and counsel for his spiritual sons and followers. The text was to become one of the most controversial manuscripts ever offered by the monastic culture, in this part of the world.

A controversial manuscript

As we have mentioned before, the manuscript of the *Autobiography*,signed by the famous abbot of Neamts, is a subject of debate and controverse in the world of scientists and that happens on more than one topic.

First, the location of the original manuscript is a very problematic issue. The Russsian scientists claim to hold, in the library of Sankt Petersburg Academy of Sciences, the only copy written and corrected by the hand of Paisius himself , while the Romanian scholars, especially the ones belonging to the clergy, assume that the authentic autograph paisian manuscript can be found in the library of Secu monastery, in Moldova, where Paisius has lived as an abbot, for only four years, between 1775 and 1779. Both parts have their own arguments to support their version, but the fact is, that until present day, there is no undeniable indication of where exactly the original manuscript might be. The absence of a catalogue, with the exact location in the world, of the fourty-four autograph paisian manuscripts, known to have existed at Neamts at the moment of his death, makes only things worse.

Second, experts in the study of Paisius' life and work cannot agree upon the extent to which this work has been truly accomplished. The text of the *Autobiography* stipulates at the very beginning that it is going to tell the full story of Paisius' life, since the moment of his birth, until the years of constituting and organizing the huge and well-known monastic community in Neamts. In spite of this declared in advance story trajectory, the narration of the events stops at the moment when, after a first year of living in the Romanian

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monasteries of Vrancea-Buzău, during his first four years stay in the Romanian Countries, as a young apprentice aspiring to a monk's life, he decides to move again from one hermitage to another.

The text stops in a very abrupt manner, with the words *„So, I left..."*, while the destination of this new departure is neither stated, nor inferable in any way. It is a paradoxical stop that resulted in a new dilemma for the world of scholars.

The question that split them again into two separate teams, with contradictory opinions is: should such a text be considered an unfinished work, that got simply interrupted by the prolonged illness and death of its author, or is it a split manuscript of which second part got lost or misplaced in a different library, or a different collection of other manuscripts? The supporters of this second position are still looking for the missing part of the paisian *Autobiography*, especially within the monastic collections of manuscripts held in Romanian and Russian libraries, but the sad fact is that even if such a second part might have existed, it could have very probably dissapeared in the huge fire that happened in Neamts monastery, in 1862, destroying two thirds of the monastic library there. An inventory of what had existed there before the great fire did not exist, and that made it impossible to list what has been lost with the fire.

What we are left with is a text of 113 leaves, written on both pages and having known translations and modern editions in four different languages: Romanian, Italian, French and English.[2] Their historical, documentary, cultural and literary value is probably, the only aspect of this work that can neither be put to question, nor become subject of any controverse.

The road as a metaphor of the sacred grammar

Another puzzling issue about this famous text is its atypical tone and structure. When hearing about the memories of a person who lived for over fifty years a monk's life in different monasteries and hermitages, one would expect to deal with a text written on a very neutral tone, rather austere, of the kind we can find everywhere in the *Lives of Saints.* Instead of this, the text surprises us displaying a vast repertoire of literary species, varying from lyrical descriptions of profound sensitiveness and authentic poems in prose, to

[2] The bibliographycal index for these editions is as it follows: **(Romanian)** Paisie Velicikovski, *Autobiografia unui stareț*, traducere Elena Linţa, Ed. Deisis, Sibiu, 1996 şi *Autobiografia şi viețile unui stareț*, traducere Elena Linţa, Ed. Deisis, Sibiu, 2002; **(Italian)** Paisij Veličkovskij, *Autobiografia di uno starets*. Presentazione di T.Špidlik. Introduzione, traduzione e note a cura della comunitá dei Fratelli Contemplativi di Gesù, Edizioni Scritti Monastici, Abbazia di Praglia, 1988; **(French)** Paisiy Velichkovskij, *Autobiographie d'un starets*, présentation de T.Špidlik, „Spiritualité orientale", tome 54, Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1991, and **(English)** *The life of Paisyi Veličkovsky,* translated by J.M.E. Featherstone, with an introduction by A.-E. N. Tachiaos (Harvard Library of Early Ukrainian Literature, English Translations, tom IV), Cambridge MA, 1989.

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unexpected scenes, seeming as if depicted from a novel of adventures or even a thriller.

The whole text structure is built around the motif of pilgrimage, the theme of the road representing thus, the architectonic principle of the plot texture. The space is that of pilgrimage, the time is that of crisis and these two combine themselves in a recurrent pattern that represents the dynamic factor of the text and its advancing scheme: the teenager facing the world is confrunted with a crisis, he thinks of a solution that he soon after that turns into reality, there is an interval of calm and quiet following, but sooner or later the solution is invariably invalidated by external factors, the crisis shows up again, resulting in the necessity for a new solution. The different stages of this narrative pattern are linked together by the theme of the road, that assures the coherence of the text and its unity at the level of signification. Within the imagological universe of the text, there are different images of roads that have to be followed by the young pilgrim: the snowy road, the road at day time, at night time, the road through dark frozen fearful woods, the road on water, on wild rivers threatening the lives of the travellers. Numerous roads spreading out towards horizon, all of them being friends or enemies of the main character, becoming themselves characters and building up the semantic and symbolic space of the text.

First, the road appears in the text as the place of separation, of parting from the beloved ones, but also as a dimension of identity distinction. It is on the road towards Kiev, close to the small town of Reshetilovka, that young Paisius last sees his mother and bids her a sorrowful and secret farewell. The mother doesn't know she will never see him again, thinking it will be just another ordinary schoolterm. But he knows he decided to flee from school and get lost into remote forsaken hermitages and be dead for the wordly ways of life.

It is also on the road towards Kiev that he last waves good-bye to his best friend, the playmate of his childhood. His friend promisses to catch up with the young fugitive pilgrim later and set off for the unknown with him, but the promised reunion of the two friends will never happen and Paisius knows it from the moment of saying good-bye. His last recollections of his beloved mother and of his dear friend from his hometown are images of two people who loved him and stood waving in the middle of the road, shedding tears and foreseeing a departure with no return. The road is here not only a place of parting from the dear ones, not only a dimension of estrangement from family, friends, hometown and fatherland, but also a space that materializes a decision, a choice that builds up an identity and personalizes a destiny voluntarily assumed.

Further on, the road appears as a place of martyrdom. From a story told by a host of the pilgrims, of the story within a story kind, we find out about the martyrdom of a deacon serving in an Orthodox village church, in the parts of Ukraine occupied by the Polish army. Although compelled by the Polish authorities of the county to recite during Sunday Mass the Credo according to

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Catholic rules, he would fearlessly refuse it and tell the Credo respecting the old Orthodox tradition of the Eastern Church. For this, he would be literally dragged out of church, out on the road, and be beaten to death by Polish soldiers, under the eyes of the terrified villagers and of his own mother. The road is here a place of testimony and martyrdom and the feeling that spaces out its dimensions is fear. The young pilgrim is afraid, hesitates, regrets the decisions he has made, wondering if they were the correct ones, but he still clings to the idea of finding his way in the world and discovering the path towards an authentic living in the truth of Christ.

During his journey, the main character, young Paisius, called in his youth by his wordly name, Petru, and then by his first monastic name, brother Platon, comes to know many different sacred places, huge cathedrals (as the main church of the Lavra Pecerska) or very small hermitages (as the one in Kitaev or the Romanian ones in Vrancea-Buzău : Dălhăutsi, Trăisteni, Cîrnu). He describes them all, in the pages of his *Autobiography,* with the sharp sense of a keen observer, who understands and feels that such buildings are witnesses of faith and history and keepers of the archives of time. The text becomes here a valuable document for comparing the Ukrainian monasticism (of the Russian type) practiced on the Dnipro' shores, in the XVIIIth century, with the Romanian type of monk's life, taking place at the same time, at the foot of the Carpathians. The differences are big and relevant: while the Ukrainian monasticism of the Slavic kind is very severe and austere, the Slav monks having a pronouced tendency towards mortification and asceticism, the Romanian monasticism appears in the pages of the *Autobiography,* to be rather more luminous and contemplative, based on the values of Athonite hesychasm and the practice of *The Prayer of the Heart* (or the Jesus Prayer). All these aspects reveal themselves to the apprentice-traveller during the different stages of his journey, while the road becomes a keeper of the archives of history and civilization. The road here spaces out dimension while condensing time in stone archives. His role is to give testimony of the hundreds of years of Orthodox Christian monastic tradition, both Slavic and Romanian.

Among the images of the text's world, the road is the most persistent one, stretching out towards unknown horizons as a succession of signs and symbols, linearly displayed in space and time; a configuration that reminds us the linear chain of the linguistic signs that constitute the object of grammar. Thus, in the elaboration of the text, the road suggests us , by analogy, the notion of a *sacred grammar*, that is to be learned, acquainted with, just as a grammar of a historical language, step by step, with the purpose of communicating with the Sacred, the Divine realm, with God, and through Him, with the others around us and with our own self.

The *Sacred Grammar* would therefore be a system of signs and symbols, a code of communication with the Sacred, a code that is accessible to the pilgrim by gradually assimilating the alphabet and the grammar of the *Spiritual*, a code

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and a guide that will eventually help him cross the distance between the earthly Jerusalem (identifyable with every religious Mass, wherever It might take place) and the Heavenly Jerusalem, the ultimate destination of every earthly individual pilgrimage. It is a reading system of the paisian manuscript towards which, the text literally pushes us, taking into account that the vocabulary used to narrate all the adventurous events of the story and to describe the wonderful scenes of nature, is often relying on whole syntagms taken from the text of the Orthodox Christian Mass. It is as if the whole text of the *Autobiography* would be but a palimpsest on the original text of the Holy Mass (another truly surprising feature of this work).

The *Autobiography* of Paisius Velichkovsky is rather a forgotten book. Abbot Paisius, sanctified by the church of Mount Athos in 1983, by the Russian Orthodox Church in 1988 and by the Romanian Orthodox Church in 1992, has remained in history with the name of Saint Paisius of Neamts and is remembered for his huge cultural work, as the translator of Philokalia and an organizer of school. He is also worshipped for his profound spiritual life and his endless love for people. Very little or almost nothing is said though, about his literary talent, that was undeniable, glamorous, brilliant and without which his translations could no have been so perfect. This huge literary talent is radiating in the pages of the *Autobiography* at its best and gives a most memorable shape, to a work of tremendous historical, documentary, pedogogical and literary value. A work offered as a gift by Paisius Velichkovsky to his disciples, to the generations to come after him, but also to each and every person looking for God, in this ever tormented world.

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