At the Heights of Despair in ... Vasile Voiculescu

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Dans ce texte je vais essayer à souligner le fait que Vasile Voiculescu n'est pas seulement un "illustrateur" des thèmes et des motifs bibliques, mais il est leur interprète authentique à partir d'une vision vraiment personnelle. Le mélange d'un "autrefois" archaïque du monde biblique et un „maintenant" de la pureté chrétienne donne la vérité et le désespoir de Voiculescu.

Mots-clés: littérature roumaine, poésie, Vasile Voiculescu, martyr

Unlike his contemporaries, Lucian Blaga and Tudor Arghezi (very different themselves from each other on this theme line), Vasile Voiculescu is the creator of a poetry in which the religious themes and motifs are exceeded in order to achieve a level of lyricism permeated by an authentic religious spirit. The expressive topography of this spirit is not achieved by the dramatization of some inner tensions of the lyrical self (as with Tudor Arghezi's *Psalms*), or by cultivating a mythical atmosphere (as with Lucian Blaga) – the religiously inspired poetry of Vasile Voiculescu is not in any case illustrative only of such themes and motifs.

The originality of Voiculescu's poetry, without becoming ostentatious, resides above all in the hyperbolic emphasis of the Christological martyr, and in this respect the poem "In the Garden of Gethsemane" remains par excellence a representative text. The poet does not rely on a given absolute hieratism, instead he rather introduces and enhances in Jesus his humanity, amplified, characterized by a high intensity, as a unique synthesis (divine and also human) around which revolves everything in the New Testament. There is a "fate" of Jesus, an exemplary predestination, but also a deeply human resistance, the signs of an opposition to this fate: "*Jesus fought fate and refused the glass ...*" For the author, the aesthetic aim is to convert this vision of the confrontation between the destiny of God the Son, and, on the other hand, the powers of the man into details, image, structural configuration.

Everywhere we find signs of living intensely that moment as a test "*fallen to his knees in the grass*" or "*blood sweats ran down on his face pale as ashes,*" the red of the blood in the hyperbolic notation "*blood sweats*," the rhythm and the contour of his posture ("*fallen to his knees*") are all highlights of human vulnerability, which however, in view of the poet, take echoes of cosmic amplitude: "*and the harmony of his cry aroused a storm in the skies*."

Judged from the perspective of religious dogma, the image of the "*unmerciful hand*" that comes down from heaven "*holding the dreadful cup*" could be suspected of heresy if we consider only the surface of the text. But the poem's

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meaning remains essentially tied to the test that Jesus must pass with all his human doubts. In this context, in terms of style, the documents remain on the same line of the augmentation and the hyperbolic "*unmerciful*", "*dreadful*", "*huge*", "*infamous drink*", a tendency which is evident not only in the epithets, but the verb "*is about to break his soul*."

The interior drama of the moment, synthesized on the allegorical axis Death – Life does not remain abstract, Voiculescu's poetic imagery insists, on the contrary, on some sensory concreteness ("*in its green water float oily drops of honey*"), as well as images of a particular anatomical substance ("*clenching his jaws*"). But the poem ends, not by chance, on a set dominated by the atmosphere, even if here too remain some details that continue his inclination towards hyperbolic notations ("*the evening hawks*").

The suggestion of prolonged resonance of the entire poem is one of long-lasting establishment, into eternity, of this special relation between the martyrdom the man is subject to and the exemplariness of its meaning beyond what is human and transient. As in the case of the cosmic amplification at the end of the first quatrain (the immense resonance of Jesus's cry), in the last quatrain the focus moves from the face of Jesus to the appearance of a world in whose horizon Christ's fate takes exemplary overtones, an effect which can barely be seen now, is only suspected. The suggestions of intense suffering are transferred to the description of the place (the garden of Gethsemane): "*Above, the olive trees were in restless turmoil, / They seemed to want to flee the place, to not see Him anymore ...*" In this version of a symbolic landscape there is something of a deep anxiety, a pathetic note that makes you think of some of Van Gogh's landscapes, but the structure of the poem connects this ending to everything that precedes it, so that without too many direct references to Jesus, the image of the world seems to begin to impregnate itself with the pathos of such a fate. Its not by chance that the expression "the evening hawks" comes after a deliberately imprecise notation, with the role of creating an atmosphere, more vaguely, of a global symbolic effect: "*Beating wings passed through the turmoil of the garden*." The suggestion of restlessness, of anxiety is designed to anticipate the implications of Christ's martyrdom, the crucifixion. From an aesthetic point of view, the most important fact is that the conceptual and even allegorical order of the poem, which is undeniable, does not lead to abstractization and give an excessive cerebral character to the text, but rather go hand in hand with a tendency to substantiate the poetic imagery, to give it intensity and amplitude (the hyperbolic effect), relief.

From the first volume *Poezii [Poems]*, published in 1916, then *Din Ţara Zimbrului* [*From Country of the Urus*] (1918), *Pârgă* [*Ripeness*] (1921), *Poeme cu îngeri* [*Poems with Angels*] (1927), *Destin* [*Destiny*] (1933), *Urcuș* [*Ascent*] (1937) and *Întrezăriri* [*Glimpses*] (1939), these no less than seven volumes of poetry in more than a quarter of a century of creativity led Voiculescu to an increasingly exquisite mastery of a personal poetic form and the creation of his own lyrical

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universe, with a solemn and unsettlingly new internal resonance, without equivalent in our poetry.

T. Vianu observes the originality of the poet: "V. Voiculescu is always looking for a transcendent God" and G. Călinescu remembered the early stage of the poet's creation as dominated by great "number of poems similar to those of Vlahuţă, accurate and declaratorily long" but the poetry of his youth has a spontaneous traditionalism, natural, innocent even, not an adherence to the populist or Sămănătorist program.

For the poet, the poetry was not a way of living, but a form of expression. The unity of the work is given by the will upon which it is based. The evolution of the work undergoes few mutations in the aesthetic approach, the changes from one stage to another correspond to the working material and the style.

The volume *Din Ţara Zimbrului* [*The Country of the Urus*] reinforces the idea that the poet was more a craftsman rather than a spontaneous lyricist. Some verses of the volume, especially those inspired by war, sound similar to Coşbuc's poetry, others to Goga's dramatic accents. Remarkable is the search for "the collective pain our violated borders" (V. Streinu). G. Călinescu believes that only with the volume *Pârgă* [*Ripeness*] starts the proper lyrical phase of V. Voiculescu's poetry. In this volume the poet turns out to be a traditionalist in the style more than in substance, although the literary critics had argued at the time that he was a Orthodoxist traditionalist. (The poet insists in fabulous world of ideas).

The originality of the volume *Poeme cu îngeri* [*Poems with Angels*] is based on the contours that assert themselves through flexibility and on the sculptural that yields to the pictorial qualities. In *Poeme cu îngeri* [*Poems with Angels*] the change of style is visible: "the angels presented by Voiculescu even from the first poems are now citizens of villages and the plains." (N. Manolescu).

In fact, V. Voiculescu has a genuine call to the deification of the worldliness manifested ever since the volume *Poezii* [*Poems*]. G. Călinescu argues that only in *Poeme cu îngeri* [*Poems with Angels*] did V. Voiculescu succeed with that note that gives him originality, putting him up with a group of poets for whom "the angel" is a mythological basic tool.

The volume of 1921 – *Pârgă* [*Ripeness*] – is filled with accomplishments and full of originality. Poems such as "Piatra auriferă" [Gold Stone], "Noul mag" [The New Magician], "Nucul" [The Walnut], "La răscruce" [At Crossroads], "Acelaşi cântec" [The Same Song], "Curte pustie" [Deserted Courtyard], "Nor de vară" [Summer Cloud], "În grădina Ghetsemani" [In The Garden of Gethsemane] set the coordinates of the poet's art, who originate sometimes in the auto-contemplation of the spirit, of the humanized core of the divine. *Destin* [*Destiny*] and *Urcuș* [*Ascent*] reveal new deep lyrical note in the poet's verses. *Urcuș* [*Ascent*] asserts itself through musicality, the word choice being made not by relief, but by sound. This volume is also remarkable through the propensity towards pastel, romance, ballad driven by permanent concern to avoid the direct expression of the self, to avoid feelings and take refuge in objective forms.

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Urcuş [*Ascent*] has autobiographical echoes. Everything is seen through the perspective of child raised in the countryside. Autumn is brought forth with its reddish dryness, winter with the fire in the fireplace, a carnival celebration and even outlaw figures (for example, Stoian the tall and with glowering face).

In "În Grădina Ghetsemani" [In The Garden of Gethsemane] the poet's technique is more precise, and expression is more individualized. The biblical scenes and motifs are not simple elements of the décor anymore, but allegories of the human anxieties in his aspiration towards God. The starting point of the poetry is in the Gospel of Saint Luke.

The motif of Jesus's Prayer is common in many works of art (Duccio, El Greco, Durer, A. Mantegna, G. Bellini). V. Voiculescu maintains in the structure of the poem most details of the biblical text, which he develops into a poetic fabric permeated by a mystical devotion. In the religiously inspired poetry, the image of Jesus is usually associated with the theme of pain, the writer insisting on His Calvary.

"The Christian mysticism" (T. Vianu) is what reveled to V. Voiculescu "the mystical of the poetry state itself, without which art is a kind of industry." (V. Streinu)

The name "Gethsemane" comes from the Hebrew Gat Shemen and means "garden where olives were pressed." Here, according to the Bible, Jesus spent his last night of freedom, torn by a great state of fear, with the soul troubled by the hopelessness of the people, but undefeated by their betrayal. Here He will receive the kiss of Judas and here He will be arrested.

The religious inspiration sets its limits in the biblical scene of the last night that the Son of Man spends with the apostles. The narrative picture fades in the feverish search of the symbol. With the fierceness of a treasure hunter, of a slave building the poem, the poet throws in the game all the stylistic "weapons" to avoid the beaten paths. The formula of the verse is that of the lyrical myth, and the theme remains ultimately that of the human consciousness: the possibility of the rejected sin even as a possible idea.

The duality, a component specific to Voiculescu's poetry occurs here too: purity along with sin, light and darkness, heaven and hell, temptation and abstinence. The poem, as a whole, illustrates an option: between real and ideal, the ideal is prefered. The approach of the religious theme is done with the scrupulosity of the old style craftsman poet.

The whole poem-icon is thus organized around the elements related to the dual nature of Jesus. Before martyrdom, Jesus hesitates. Doubts and anxieties, fear of death are human, overcoming the moment of turmoil and the fear are inherently divine.

In the first stanza the poet composed the poetic image of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, emphasizing unlike the pictorial representations, the human struggle, the fight with a destiny He dreaded: "*Fallen to His knees in the grass, He kept resisting*." By visual there are set in opposition the humanity and the divinity,

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suggested, on the one hand, by the blood that is earthly life and on the other hand, the colour white, symbol of heavenly purity "*blood sweats ran down on his face pale as ashes.*" The pain intensity takes cosmic proportions, the whole world was overwhelmed by a metaphorical grief: "*And His bitter cry raised storm in the skies*."

The following two stanzas develop the tragedy of the Man terrified by the Calvary of the Crucifixion, but also how he overcame this moment by understanding the meaning of Christ's divine mission. By alternating the perspective, the doubt, the hesitation is amplified. "*The infamous drink*", symbol of the sins of mankind to be redeemed by sacrifice, is hidden by the deceptive appearance of honey, the venom is associated with sweetness. The struggle with death goes beyond the limits of a human drama, representing allegorically the essence of the eternal conflict between soul and body, spirit and matter.

The glass of torments is also associated in Voiculescu's vision with the Grail. In it, Joseph of Arimathea is said to have collected the drops of blood under the cross of the Crucified. Thus, it becomes the Holy Grail – a symbol of purity: "*An unmerciful hand, holding the dreadful cup / Came down tempting him and brought it to his mouth ...*" "*In its green water float oily drops of honey* / *And under the terrible venom He felt sweetness... / But clenching his jaws with His last strength / Struggling with Death, He had forgotten about Life!*"

The last stanza completes the traditional gospel framework from the first lyrics. The agitated image of the olive trees which "*seemed to want to flee the place, to not see Him anymore*" amplifies the tragic character of the vision. A wind of fear pervades the world, announcing the martyrdom that will change the destiny of mankind. The last verse: "*And the evening hawks fly in circle looking for prey*" is loaded with prophetic suggestions.

Projecting this drama in a mythical time is revealed, at grammatical level, in the use of the verbs in the imperfect tense, all being predicates of main clauses.

The great merit of Voiculescu's work is that it makes you live at the same time in an archaic "then" of the Biblical world and a "now" that preserves the meaning of Christian purity.

"Voiculescu slips into the solemn and cold lines the modern anxiety derived from the consciousness of doom and deliverance." (Eugen Simion)

Vasile Voiculescu in not in such poems an "illustrator" of the biblical themes and motifs, but one of their authentic interpreters, a creative individuality really able to translate what all the artists in the world can find in the text of the New Testament into a truly personal, unique, and original version without betraying or distorting the religious core, but at the same time, never inclined to turn into a simple versification of the biblical text.

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