Ion Pillat, a religious poet?

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Notre étude a comme point de départ des anthologies de poésie religieuse roumaine parues après 1990. Persuadés que ce n'est pas cette poésie, plutôt facile, telle la peinture naïve, qui définit Ion Pillat comme poète religieux, mais plutôt un vécu subtil, transparaissant dans des vers assez méconnus, nous avons reparcouru, dans cette perspective, l'intégralité de son oeuvre, y compris posthume et mis en évidence un parcours spirituel authentique. La majeure partie de notre étude suit étroitement les trois étapes de la création de Pillat, en mettant en exergue conceptuellement et en illustrant abondamment son évolution poétique et spirituelle, l'ayant porté de l'ignorance vers la connaissance, du doute vers la certitude, des " Illusions " vers " Le balancier équilibré".

Mots-clés: Ion Pillat, poésie religieuse, parcours spirituel, étapes poétiques, quête du sens de la vie, accomplissement

Motto: 'And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all face of the earth (…) that they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us. For in him we live, and move, and have our being.' (Holy Bible, King James version, *Acts*, Chapter 17, verses 26-28)

Various volumes have been published in the last two decades regarding Romanian religious poetry, the authors trying in the forewords and even in the selection of certain names to define the concept, to classify the diversified material and to sketch the specific features of this distinct lyric poetry. Beyond small inevitable subjective differences and theoretical delimitations, the fundamental question raised by all of them was what criterion should be used in selecting religious poets and poems. For instance, an anthology lacks important names such as Eminescu, Arghezi, Blaga or Voiculescu, the authors arguing that they took into account 'poems written exclusively by Christian practitioners, most of them having been imprisoned'; Valeriu Anania found it difficult to refer to Blaga as to a religious poet for 'he only uses religious properties and requisites, borrowing biblical symbols, moments or characters and sometimes a certain language'; V. Alecsandri is absent in most of the anthologies as he was little concerned with religion and yet Florentin Popescu includes him in his anthology for a conventional poem written on Easter. One can find Ion Pillat in almost all the anthologies published after 1990, among other inter-war poets especially those gathered around 'Gândirea' magazine. The titles often chosen are predictable: those belonging to volumes like *Biserică de altădată* (*The Church of Yore*) and mainly those included in the cycles *Povestea Maicii Domnului (The Story of Mother of God)* and *Chipuri*

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pentru o Evanghelie (Characters for a Gospel), i.e. all declaratively Christian and traditional poems rather simple and childish, comparable to naïve painting. Can we consider Ion Pillat a religious poet taking into account only these 'obviously Christian' examples? Aren't there any other clues of authentic spiritual experience in other poems or volumes than those too often mentioned? These are but a few obscure doubts which lead us to the same major question faced also by the authors of the anthologies we were referring to at the beginning of the article: what are the true features of a religious poet? Could it be the existence of a number of poems with a biblical instrumentation or tackling religious themes? If so, many of them could be mere versifying lines or pious attitudes. On the other hand is there a conventional Easter or Christmas poem a religious one by all means and vice-versa isn't there religious a non declarative Christian poem which possesses a certain metaphysical shiver though? Ion Buzaşi in the foreword to his anthology of *Romanian Religious poetry* (Dacia Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 2003) specifies: 'Beside poets who are religious *by definition*, as Dumitru Staniloae would have said, such as Nichifor Crainic, V. Voiculescu, Radu Gyr, our anthology intends to show there is a sort of *diffuse religiosity* within the works of some other poets and also that religious poetry does not mean only those lyric works which have explicitly religious titles and biblical inspiration, but also those which express a Christian feeling'. Similarly our article intends to substantiate that apart from the often mentioned and obviously religious verses Ion Pillat was a poet and a man in search for the Absolute, this very feverish seek followed by a true clarification of his mind and soul defining him as a true religious poet, even if this might be labeled as *diffuse religiosity*. It is well-known that long before literary critique's point of view the poet himself divided his own creation into three distinct stages[1]: the first or his youth stage influenced by Parnassianism and Symbolism, the second or his mature stage defined as traditionalist and the third occurring towards the end of his short life[2], a (neo) classical one. This poetic path is doubled by a spiritual one which can be easily described: from ignorance to cognition, from doubt to certainty, from *Illusions* to *Balanced Scales*[3].

Let us take a closer look to his first stage of creation. If we were guided by appearances it would seem significant for our approach that Ion Pillat begins his poetic career by writing two poems both entitled *In the Cathedral*. One was written in December 1906 and refers to Notre Dame de Chartres, the other one dated 1907 being inspired by Notre Dame de Paris. In fact we experience exterior descriptive and rather conventional poems engendered by the fascination for Western art and architecture recently discovered in his first dwelling years in France. And yet one can find few clues about his spiritual status even in these first shallow poems. There is on one hand a bookish pessimism originated in Eminescu's works

[1] Both in his *Confessions* and the author's edition of his works published at Fundațiile Regale in 1944.

[2] The poet died at the age of 54.

[3] The titles of two books signed by Ion Pillat, the first in 1916 and the latter posthumously.

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constantly frequented by the young admirer, on the other hand a lamentation over the unfaithful and meaningless Present when compared to a Past rich in faith:

‘Norod din veacuri stinse, credeai în veşnicie –
Din viaţa ta îngustă prin rugă te scăpai
Şi mistic catedrala în aer înălţai
Spre a uita-n văzduhuri a lutului domnie.

Azi am pierdut credinţa în tine, Nemurire!
O, Dumnezeu din ceruri, azi cerul Tău e gol.
Dar sufletul îmi cere cu spaimă un idol,
Căci blestemat-ai omul să creadă în iubire.’
(*În catedrală*, Notre Dame de Paris)

The modern man perfectly, represented by the adolescent Ion Pillat when finding alone before nothingness, looks for assistance, for a landmark, other than God, an idol in particular. The entire modern poetry including Ion Pillat’s nourished from his Parisian experience has its origin in man’s urgent need and demand to fill his spiritual void. The successive idols in the first volumes (*Pagan Dreaming*, *Momentary Eternities* and *Illusions*[4]) are Buddhism, Greek pagan gods, lost Past (or Recollection) and Eros, all joyfully found and worshipped for a while but each time bitterly left as a worn coat. The themes found in the three debut volumes mentioned above prove our assertion, the emblematic poem for the illusions experimented one by one by our young poet bearing the title *To the Infidel*[5]:

‘Copil aprindeam lumânări de ceară,
Mă-nchinam cântând la icoane sfinte
Şi păşind simţeam că-mi merge alături
Mântuitorul.

Ca băiat visai de Sakya Muni: zile
Nemişcat steteam recitind cuvântu-i
Şi basmul lui Jizo şi vechea poveste-a
Fecioarei Kwanon.

Ca flăcău zărit-am Centauri o noapte,
Mai albi ca lumina lunii prin ramuri.
Frăţie legai cu neamul sălbatic
Şi zeii păgâni.

[4] *Visări păgâne*, *Eternităţi de-o clipă* and *Amăgiri* in Romanian original (RO).
[5] *Necredincioasei* (RO).

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Apoi mi-am fost singur tovarăş şi lege,
Dorinţa dintâi şi visul din urmă.
Orbiseră ochi-mi ţintiţi deapururi
În sufletu-mi trist.

Dar azi mi se cern credinţele moarte.
Se scutură, pier ca frunzele toamnei,
Căci tu mi-ai ieşit în cale-mi, tăcută,
Necredincioaso!'

As seen above one could find not only Eminescu's poetic tools but also a lucid chronological review of his own delusions. He walks in life being in tight communion with God, even if a childish one as described in the first stanza, but which will make him soon write a poem in prose[6] called *The Last Saint's Story* whose subject seems to be taken directly from the *Egyptian Patericus*. His Buddhist dreaming alongside with his beloved Centaurs were in fact bookish experiences of a high school and then a Sorbonne student passionate of history and geography. The reflexive solitude undertaken in the fourth stanza ends in tiredness and sadness and the Eros emerging at the end of the poem will soon fade away proving to be for human experience as unsatisfied as all the others.

'Iubito de pe vremuri, nu plânge la fereastră,
Nu aştepta la geamuri cu ramuri lungi să bat…
E cerul prea aproape, e umbra prea albastră,
Ca să-mi aduc aminte de tânguirea voastră,
Femei, în care visu-mi în van s-a căutat.'
(*Dezrobire*[7])

The first signs of change in his understanding the world appear at the end of *Pagan Night*[8]. Sprung from the disciple's emulation for his master and therefore dedicated to Alexandru Macedonski this poem describes an unceaseless transmigration of his soul through a 'world of pagan ages'[9] until it is stopped and thus saved by the identification with Jesus on the cross:

'De aur era luna şi s-a făcut ca varul -
Apar trei cruci de sânge pe cer de ametist
Şi-n tropotul năpraznic se-nalţă sfânt Calvarul
Cu patima credinţei şi dragostei lui Christ.
Răsare blând obrazu-I şi dureros de trist

[6] As a matter of fact this marked his editorial debut in 1912.
[7] *Emancipation.*
[8] *Noapte păgână* (RO).
[9] A quote from one of Macedonski's poems.

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Sub palida lumină mai albă decât varul.

Dar şi-a oprit avântul Licornul sforăind:
Îl ţintuieşte groaza şi tremură deodată…
Iar ochii mei de cruce nu pot să-i mai desprind,
Christos mă fulgerează cu faţa lui ciudată.
Mă turbură privirea în veci neturburată,
Fiori din tălpi la creştet mă ţin şi mă cuprind.

E vis sau nebunie? Dar Christ nu e pe cruce,
Ci eu mă văd eu însumi de cuie răstignit…
Şi luna suie cerul şi vine şi se duce
Prin zări de întuneric… Tăcere… Am murit?
De veacuri stau de strajă pe cruce pironit
Şi nimbul nemuririi pe fruntea mea străluce.'

The volume *The Garden inside Walls*[10] indicates the transition from the first to the second stage of Ion Pillat's creation and is therefore eclectic. Verses reminding of his old not yet forgotten illusions coexist with more and more mature reflections about life. We should take into account not only obviously biblical or religious poems such as *Satan*, *Monastery* or *Soror sancta, Mater dolorosa*[11] but also titles like *The Slop*[12] (a description of a metamorphosis of a slop into a marvelous garden, i.e. an allegory for the soul who finds hope in the transfigurating power of Divine Grace), *The Shutter*[13] (where death is depicted as a threshold to a new form of life: 'Azi mă gândesc la noaptea coşciugului de lemn,/ La Tatăl meu din ceruri, la mâna ce-o să vie/ Să-mi dea, crăpând mormântul, lumina pe vecie.'), *So as to climb to You*[14] or *Command*[15], poems in which the soul gets free from the tight imprisonment of the body, house, cell or even church, experiencing the great liturgy of nature:

'Deschide-te naturii ca mugurul luminii,
Şi sparge închisoarea îngustului tău trup!
Simţirile să-ţi fie albinele grădinii,
Brăzdând în zbor văzduhul, cu aurite linii,
Ca soarele să-l prindă în mierea unui stup.'
(*Poruncă*)

[10] *Grădina între ziduri* (RO).
[11] *Satan*, *Mănăstire* and *Soror sancta, Mater dolorosa* (RO).
[12] *Balta* (RO).
[13] *Oblonul* (RO).
[14] *Ca să suim la Tine* (RO).
[15] *Poruncă* (RO).

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This is Ion Pillat's frame of mind when he steps into his second stage of creation marked by the famous volume *On Argeş River Upstream*[16]. The poem entitled *Homage*[17] which opens the well-known *Florica* cycle takes its model from the Gospel parable of the Prodigal Son: the familiar picturesque nature at Florica domain where he happily spent his childhood and the piously revived Past generously welcome the one who knocked about a long time among strangers:

'Am rătăcit pe piatra cetăţilor haine
Şi m-am jucat cu anii cum alţii zvârlă mingi…
Tu numai, păstrătoare a zilelor mezine,
Mai poţi cu-a lor lumină pierdută să m-atingi.

Fii pentru regăsitul o mânăstire vie
În care amintirea aprinde lumânări
Şi unde, pe o tâmplă de umbră, reînvie
Ochi cunoscuţi, luceferi ieşind din înnoptări…'

Ion Pillat's traditionalism is not new poetical clothing as it could be superficially regarded but a return to his natural way of writing once settled back in his country. His first poetical attempts later gathered by Ion Pillat himself in a cycle called *The House of Recollection*[18] as well as others recovered from various early manuscripts prove that his entire Parnassian and Symbolist canter was but a mere deviation from his initial natural path retrieved and developed after 1918. 'My youth verses were not the ripe fruit of my soul and native land but the forced one of the brain and foreign libraries', the poet confessed in 1942. And yet, his look back to the Past and the obsessive cult of Recollection are but new 'illusions' of the spirit since the would-be pastels in *On Argeş River Upstream* – although closer to the truth and subsequently revealing the peace of nature, ancient patriarchal laws and a sort of wisdom of the earth – lament continuously over the idea of *fugit irreparabile tempus*. The poet's captive soul in the cell of time past and gone is thus irreconcilable. As the volume *The Church of Yore* is better known and often mentioned to prove the religious emotion encapsulated in its poems, although filled with a mysticism lacking transcendence as Ion Pillat himself described it, we shall not stop to comment upon it, considering the poet's *Confessions* significant once again: 'The critique saw Rainer Maria Rilke's influence in my second stage of creation. I see no influence here but rather a kind of motive assimilation or more exactly a kindred inspiration. For instance, excepting the subject and the scenes enumeration in the cycle *The Story of Mother of God* which one can find in the holy Bible otherwise or in the Flemish or Italian primitive painting, I don't see any connection of cause-effect type between Rilke's

[16] *Pe Argeş în sus* (RO).
[17] *Închinare* (RO).
[18] *Casa Amintirii* (RO).

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Marienleben with such a strong catholic German inspiration, mystical and musical in the same time, and my own interpretation of Virgin Mary's life so very Romanian up to its localization in Argeş area with its rolling hills, so very orthodox in its icon peasant representation if not even in the ancient heresies of popular borrowed motives. If I truly had a model it was not Rilke's work but our people's with its folklore poetry…'. Nevertheless Ion Pillat's approach in *The Church of Yore* shallow as it may seem proves to have been a necessary stage to be achieved and surpassed on his inner spiritual route. In contemplating the deserted and ruined churches – a metaphor for his own state of spirit at that time – he does not meet despair or hopelessness, but Divine Grace:

'Şi-n mine şi-n poiană şi pe drum
Deodată s-a întins atâta pace
Că Dumnezeu plutea ca un parfum
De fân cosit, când claia se desface…

Şi-aş fi crezut că totu-i zugrăvit
Şi că privesc, copil, o stampă veche,
De nu-mi venea – când şters, când desluşit –
Un zvon adânc de clopot la ureche.'
(*Mânăstire*)

His clarifying both poetic and spiritual process intuitively sought since 1928 when he entitled one of his books quite like this *Clarification* will be completed with each volume published in the third stage of (neo) classical creation. The southern solar Greek and Balcic[19] experience will have a catalytic effect in his perfection process. Although he knows he is 'not cured completely of Chimera' as he describes himself in the Sonnet XXII in *Minerva's Shield* cycle[20] he feels at peace with himself, with Life, with Past which does not tear him apart anymore. Everything around him tends to be read as an allegory. *The Last Rose*[21] teaches him that 'One can blossom even in death', a hip rose tree which grows in a cloven stone of a sarcophagus shows him the kingdom of death is thus conquered, etc. Most of the poems included in *Lost Shore*[22], *Balcic* or *Shadow of Time*[23] deal with the soul and describe a state of completion, of peace and reconciliation, of serene acceptance of death:

'Mi-am dezlegat sandala ca o frunză

[19] A small town in today Bulgaria where he bought a piece of land in the mid '30s and built two houses.
[20] *Scutul Minervei* (RO).
[21] *Roza cea din urmă* (RO).
[22] *Ţărm pierdut* (RO).
[23] *Umbra timpului* (RO).

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Ce cade moartă la piciorul meu,
Mi-am limpezit făptura să n-ascunză
Nimic din ce nu duce pân' la Zeu.

Pe ţărmul mării mă înalţ: o urnă
În care doar lumină am turnat.
Nu plâng, nu chem tot ce-am lăsat în urmă.
Stau singur pentru jertfă împăcat.

Din pietre albe i-am durat altarul,
Din lemne scumpe flăcări i-am ivit –
Şi cerul nalt cum îmi primeşte darul,
Urc rugul împlinirii, fericit.'

(*Alesul*)[24]

Of no chance at all does Ion Pillat's last volume published in 1942 bear the significant title of *Fulfillment*[25]. It takes over and carries on the inner understanding process as seen in poems like *The Founder*[26]:

'De greu păcat să aflu mântuire
Şi sufletul să mi-l aşez în rai,
Punându-i hram pe Sfântul Niculai,
Smerit durez din viaţă mănăstire.

Acum aştept, încrezător în soartă,
Pe-Arhanghelul trimes de Dumnezeu.'

or *Hunting*[27] (where God –the Hunter send his greyhounds to catch the poet's soul who vainly tries to find shelter; it is only when he kneels and surrenders to the oxymoronical 'good fangs' that he understands, as the main character in Dino Buzzati's *Monster Colombre*, that the so-called evil he was fighting to avoid all his life was in fact the only way of saving his soul):

'Ogarii Tăi, o, Doamne,-mi dau de urmă,
I-aud chefnind ne-nduplecat prin zări.
Zadarnic fug în mine şi-n uitări
Adânc m-ascund de apriga lor turmă.

Bătaia lor cumplită nu se curmă.
Îngenunchează – ciută-n tremurări –

[24] *The Chosen One*.
[25] *Împlinire* (RO).
[26] *Ctitorul* (RO)
[27] *Vânătoare* (RO).

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Tu, inimă,-ncolţită de-ntrebări
La ape vii când colţii buni te scurmă.

Pe apele curate îţi apleacă
Şi setea pătimaşă şi fiorul
Iubirii care-n veci de veci nu seacă.

Ogarii Tăi, o, Doamne, mi-au rupt lutul –
Acuma poţi, Părinte, să-mi fii scutul
Şi, pradă, îmi prind singur Vânătorul.'

After wandering through successive bookish and luring Maya veils in his youth, then going through a descriptive and rather formal traditional period and getting over a short elegiac temptation and the mendacious sirens of the past, Ion Pillat reaches the equilibrium both in his poetry and personal life. It is not coincidental that when death occurred he was preparing a volume which had born the title *Inward Path*[28] for a long time but was changed by the poet right before he passed away into *Balanced Scales*, accidentally or not using a collocation met in the *Proverbs* of the *Old Testament*[29].

From the literary point of view we face a poetic path with distinct landmarks and stages as any other poet's after all. From the spiritual point of view it represents a feverish and constant search for the purpose of life and for its major goal which identifies with Divinity. The last question we should answer at the end of our article is if such a religious approach of Ion Pillat's poetry is not a forced perspective. We believe it is not. The numerous spiritual poems not included in this brief overview support our position as well as his own involuntary testimony according to which the act of creation is a form of praying: 'From my point of view a poem is above all a vital experience (*ein Erlebniss*) but a vital experience of a certain type, that is cleared and purified of any logical connection, which suddenly shakes the soul and in the same time confers music to sights and plasticity to sounds. It is a sudden tremor followed a little later by a state of life detachment, by a weird distraction, a state I usually experience when dreaming'[30].

[28] *Drum lăuntric* (RO).
[29] Chapter 11, *About justice*, verse 1: 'A false balance is abomination to the Lord, but a just weight is his delight'.
[30] Ion Pillat, *Confessions*.

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