

VARLAAM' S HOMILY -BUT OF THE ROMANIAN LANGUAGE. AN ETHICAL, AESTHETIC AND MORAL EMBLEM OF THE INDIGENOUS MEDIEVAL CULTURE

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Abstract

Translator, man of culture and high prelate of Orthodoxy in medieval Moldova, Varlaam connects his name with writing culture in the Romanian language and with committing liturgies in the same language, conciliating the universal cultural opening with the indigenous spirit. The first signs of original literature offer Varlaam's work the meaning of a cultural initiation into the act of literary creation in the Romanian language. The taming of the dogma in ethical and moral interpretations, with humanistic vocation, includes him in the gallery of those who determined the development of the original medieval culture, with major implications on the profile of the ordinary individual.

Keywords: *writing in the Romanian language, translations, verses, literature, ethics, moral, culture, national spirit, universal spirit.*

1. THE BEGINNINGS

Through time, the Secu Monastery preserves the personality image of the cult hegumen that it had in 1608, his name being Varlaam. Son of a yeoman family, who became a personality with solid education in Lvov, the bishop of Moldova become well-known for his translations and for his quality as a counsellor and priest for Miron Barnovski, the ruler of Moldova during those times. Under this quality he went to Russia to offer the tsar the relics of the Saint martyr Iacob in exchange for some icons directed towards the Dragomirna Monastery. On his way to Russia, he meets in Kiev with Petru Movilă, archimandrite at the time, whom he offers a cultural gift of high value, the manuscript of the Slavonic Octoih from Neamț, with the purpose of inspiring the typing cultural initiatives according to the model, a fact with took place in 1630 through the appearance, in Kiev, of o similar printed mater. Fascinated by

the culture of the monk Varlaam, the hospodar Petru Movilă records the 1629 visit, which took place at the initiative of the hospodar Miron Barnovschi. Therefore, Vaarlam exerts diplomatic prerogatives, in the international relations of those times, with visible cultural effects, determining Petru Movilă's intervention a long side the tsar of Russia, with the purpose of bringing in Moldova the relics of the holy miracle workers and of copying their "hagiographies", in order to offer outstanding models to the believers.

With such a cult, open and charismatic personality, Varlaam becomes the bishop of Moldova on September 23, 1632 and shortly afterwards he is proposed to fill the vacancy of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. One year after this event, in 1663, Petru Movilă becomes the bishop of Kiev, Haliciu and of entire Russia. As a lover of culter, in 1640, Varlaam decisively supports the appearance of the first superior school in Moldova, the College in Iasi, after the model of the Kiev-Movilean College. Two years later, in 1642, the Bishop builds the first printing house in Moldova at the Trei Ierarhi Church, consistent with his duties of promoting culture in the Moldovan space. However, his most important initiative was the introduction of the Romanian language in churches, a decisive act in the culturalization of the masses, who had the opportunity to understand not necessarily the service and the preach, but those sequences whose role was to offer moral bench-marks to the community.

Varlaam was the promoter of writing in the Romanian language, he develops the teaching system, launches the editorial activity, translating, correcting texts and writing an original literature. All these elements made a significant mark on

the medieval Moldova, going beyond its borders. In all his cultural endeavours, he was supported up to his death (1657) by scholar hospodar Vasile Lupu, therefore contributing to the defining of the profile of the era, known in history as the vasilian period.

2. MONK, PHILOSOPHER AND LITERATE

The complexity of Varlaam's cultural personality is reflected in the diversity of his preoccupations with were triggered by the contact with the writings of some Greek authors, corroborated with the popular spiritual elements, reflected in the folklore. This cultural complementarity generated the valuing of the Byzantine orientation of the traditional culture in translating some fundamental works, among which we can notice *Leastvița* by Ioan Scărarul, with a pronounced emblematic character for Christian spirituality, in which the theme of *the spiritual ladder* and the idea of *a sacred centre* are treated from a hermeneutical perspective. At the same time, this theme configures an ascetic ontological code, whose aim is the perfection of the human being, by relating it to the divine model. Beyond the translation, the preface aims to induce a lecture key, offering the work a pedagogical character.

The correlation between human life and the symbolic ascent leads to a Christian conception about self-realisation, on the one hand, the individual's lack of power in relationship with the life destined and also man's will to overcome the limits and to have access to the sacred space, symbolised by the sacred centre, the intersection place between the Sky and the Earth. The centre of the World, which is to be found in the tree of the world or in the sacred mountain, as expressions of the nature created by God or in the image of the temple, as artefact, ensures the space in which the meeting between a human being and God is possible, in the context of an initiatory communication. The biblical scale, present in the sacred pictures from various monasteries is interpreted as a double-way road, ascendant and descendant, linking the earth to the sky, the finite from the infinite, the human from the divine.

The scholar Varlaam goes even further with the symbolisation, presenting the idea that the scale represents the destiny of the man in the universe, and the ascendant way configures the paradise, as aspiration, whereas the descendant way is an expression of the decline, a gliding towards the deconstruction of the individual, into a *descendoadinferos*. An image of the plenitude of the symbolic space is offered by the complementarity between heaven and hell, as expressions of the sacred and profane topos (CURTIUS, 1953) in which the bliss and the divine represent values that escape from the flow of time, converting themselves into infinity. In this symbolic context, God conceptualises itself as power becoming the Light of the World ("*... as a light they lit the world and direct the rulers and emperors towards the good deeds*" (VARLAAM, 2014)). The scholar's intentions of attracting attention towards moral perfection as an ontological ideal are obvious, offering meaning to the earthly life of the ordinary individual.

The verb *to climb* coagulates a special symbolic, by defining the meaning of life, integrating the human being in an absolutely necessary aspiration, towards moral perfection. This desideratum is to symbolically be found in the title of his work, "*the Romanian teaching book (for) the Sundays throughout the year and for the emperor feasting. With the saying and with the expenditure of Vasile Voievod and hospodar of Moldova. From a number of holy scriptures translated from the Slovenian language into the Romanian language by bishop Varlaam for Moldova*", edited in Iasi, in 1643, and instituting the civilising role of the sermon. Teaching represents quite a far horizon for simple individuals, an aspect which places them outside the cognitive horizon which allows them to understand the World in the context of the human's involvement in the social model of the era. Alongside his original contributions, whose purpose was clear, that of disseminating culture for the ordinary individual, Varlaam also carefully selects, in the same thematic line, the church books that he translates into Romanian. For example, *The speeches from the holy Gospel of Saint Calist*, supporting the education of the masses, that the priests had to do in the church ("*to be read by priests in churches in order to teach the pious Romanians*").

The purpose Vaarlam's writings in Romania is declared and assumed, being included in the line of the methods of culturalization of the simple man and not only. The idea of getting the believer close to God, as a moral bench-mark cannot be achieved without the help of the Romanian language, as a language of cult, used with the purpose of understanding liturgies by the parishioners. Varlaam's missionary conscience placed him in the gallery of the great pedagogues of the ordinary people. He is conscient that ennoblement of the being through the contamination with the sacred spirit promoted by the church cannot be achieved, with beneficial effects, unless the individual understands what is being preached, from a linguistic, cultural, moral and ethical point of view. In fact, Varlaam's conception takes the church in an area of significant importance among the representative institutions of the nation.

Complementary to religious education, that of promoting the orthodox moral precepts, the introduction of the Romanian language represents an initiative which significantly marked the relationship between faith and culture within the national space. We consider that this was one of the great virtues of Varlaam and it added an undisputable cultural component to his personality. Another great merit of his is that he synchronises his initiatives with what was going on at a cultural level, in other countries and that he was aware of. Here is what the scholar said about the style of other scholars in other countries that he knew about: "*they tried to present the Holy Scripture in a language easy to understand for other people, so that they understand and are able to confess God's wonderful deeds*" (VARLAAM, 2014).

3. SIGNS OF ORIGINAL LANGUAGE

Nicolae Iorga speaks about *The homily*, including it in beginnings of the original literature. One cannot ignore the fact that this work also includes the first verses in Romanian, *Verses in the coat of arms of Moldova*, dedicate to the personality of Vasile Lupu, a scholar hospodar who supported the typing of the work. It is interesting to notice the association between his personality and the identity of the country, through its coat of arms. It is a reflection of the

opinion of the high prelate, according to which the handsome face associated with the same kind of soul configures the image of the chosen hospodar chosen to lead the destiny of the country.

From an aesthetic point of view, the work possesses the qualities that facilitate its inclusion among some of the most important creations of the medieval period in the Romanian literature. In this respect, Nicolae Manolescu appreciated the beauty of the language used: *it speaks so that everyone can understand, combining explanations with rhetorical questions and with urges*. The art of storytelling is, in Varlaam's work, also very successful. Anticipating the concept of national literature, the bishop writes that: "*Much more virtuous, our Romanian language, which doesn't have a book for its language, with the need of understanding the book of another language. And for the lack of teachers and students. They no longer learn as much as they used to. For that they were, as a debtor to God, for the talent that he gave me, to be able to pay my debt at least until I get into the house that once belonged to my ancestors*" (VARLAAM, 2014).

The metaphorization of the word builds the abstract and open space of the generalisation of some ideas that fix the autochthonous archetype in the universal context. The scholar's cultural deeds play a matrix role for the national spirit later on coagulated by the dawn of the original Romanian literature. The structure of *The homily* makes this work, which is mostly a translation from the Slavonic language – a language of worship in the church – to position itself at the boarder between the religious, utility, cultural and fiction literature; 74 sermons destined to the sacred time of the Christian Sunday and of the important holidays of orthodoxy have in the preamble the passage form the Gospel read in the holy day, followed by moral parables meant to purify the individual from the vices of being reinless and from earthly sins. The example is supported by the example of the life of the saints, ensuring the writing with a pronounced pedagogical character and offering it a balance between ethics and aesthetics. The structure of the text often leads to legend, an aspect also consolidated by its ideal content. An example is the model of the custom-house officer and of the Pharisee, with a highly moralising character,

anticipating in some way *A number of words*, the cycle of legends, consciously integrated by their author into literature. The image of the individual presents, in the two characters, major symbols of human typology: *the rich and the poor* with the two completely opposite coordinates – *material and spiritual* – in an identifiable manner in the folk tales.

4. DOGMA AND ETHICS

The orthodox dogmatic background is obvious, grounded in the conception that the earthly existence is marked by lacks or even self-flagellation, and it will be rewarded with the heavenly life, from the heaven which will host the soul, therefore compensating and balancing the existence. Basically, this aspect which refers to the existential extremes is related to the principles of orthodoxy, also reflected, as mentioned before, in the human structure: the rich does not possess the gift of the rich spirituality, whereas the poor is rewarded with the an overflowing soul, supported by faith: *“My beloved Christians, the impotence of pride represents a huge malice! The Pharisee went into the church full of goodies, as if they were some beautiful flowers, and the custom-house officer without any goodies. And the Pharisee lost all honour because of his bragging whereas the custom-house officer got everything he prayed for because he was humble”* (VARLAAM, 2014). The reflection of spiritual richness in the simplicity of the saints' clothing is well-known from the iconographic representations, leading the human being towards God, as a laborious process of deification (CRAINIC, 1993; CRAINIC, 1994), as Nichifor Crainic presents in his writings.

Continuing with the examples regarding the shaping of the human soul from an ethical point of view, Vaarlam points out the relationship between the willing and unwilling human mistakes, their awareness and the purification of the sinful soul, through penance. Being aware of the fact that men can sin willingly or unwillingly, Vaarlam mentions the fact that the sinner who repents is rewarded with forgiveness, associating this complex process with the parable of the wandering son. The moment of spiritual renewal through the forgiveness of mistakes is presented

as following: *“it will beautify your soul and body with the beautiful vestment of the holy baptism”* (VARLAAM, 2014). Varlaam's conception is that God who reaches the human being increased its authority, in the same way the sun that passes throughout the world, does not lose its brightness, but it conserves it through people's recognition of its power. *“And if you ask how Christ enters into us and it does not stop, I also ask you: the sun, that goes through filthy and disgusting places, does it become filthy or not? I know that the one who is going to be wise and faithful will not dare to go back on it”* (VARLAAM, 2014).

Another teaching that the scholar wants to present to the people is that of God's impartiality in relationship to the World. His love of people is spread with the same measurement, therefore urging families to share their love equally among children, regardless of their typology: *“God tells its sun to shine both to the good and to the bad people, and to give rain to both good and bad. And all our deeds that seem good and beautiful to us, before God they are real and great. His Highness sorts them this was for our own good, as if everything we do is good”* (VARLAAM, 2014).

Another idea supported by the scholar bishop is that the human measure for goodness and beauty does not coincide with the divine measure, therefore you may think that you are ideal, as a human being, and the divine reward does not show itself or, on the contrary, a punishment comes over you, as a result of God's assessment. In fact, the author draws attention on the measurement instruments of the absolute values, from the perspective of divinity and the importance of knowing the holy scriptures, the books that include the criteria which lead to the discovery of the moral nobility of the ordinary man and of his potential to become from a moral point of view: *“We should take care of our sour, to light it, make it more beautiful using good things and to nourish it with God's word, to allow God with good deeds”* (VARLAAM, 2014). The inside of the human being is regarded as a permanent area of indwelling of the perennial value, while the material, passing glow is perishable. Exaggerating due to the fact that he remains prisoner to its ecclesiastic formation, Varlaam connects material wealth with a divine punishment that will through the soul into Hell, after its physical

death. The undisputable merit of the bishop remains in the creation area of existential, ethical and moral patterns, for the human being, by offering models from the hagiographic writings. His conclusion is that man's beauty is a virtue that ennoble him, only if it represents the result of a complementarity report between his physical and the moral side.

5. ONTOLOGICAL PATTERNS

The sacralised mundane by assuming some existential patterns, built starting from the lives of saints, creates a double reporting of the human being to an exemplary ontological model, whose touch creates *a break of the ontological level*, leading the human being on an ascendant life path, in general. Between the passing and the perennial glow, the individual has to choose the second life formula in order to get involved in his own becoming, alongside God's work. One example is that of the rightful Lazăr, who suffered up to self-flagellation, believing in the power of God and finally receiving the reward of heaven, a metaphor for the complete beauty, material and moral: *"We, the ones who believe in God, have to take care of our souls, to light them with good thing, to offer God good deeds"* (VARLAAM, 2014).

One of Varlaam's ideas escapes the canonical yoke and places the ethic and the civic in the same area of educating the masses. This open conception of the monk takes the mundane in the context of the refined human values, appreciating that the man can ennoble itself not only as ascetic but also as a balanced being in the social context. Therefore, he gets closer to the two worlds – the monastic and the common one, placing himself in a relationship of complementarity with God. Therefore, when it comes to Varlaam, we shall not come across that defiance and arrogance of the monk, who sees himself as being above all believers; he presents the connection between the ordinary individual and the mediated prayer, therefore offering people the chance to get into direct dialogue with God: *"As the sun does not have a brighter and a darker side that spreads light all over the place, the kingdom will also share light in one face, with beauty and jewel. This is why I ask every Christian: come into it with faith and justice*

and with good deeds and this is how you will see the face of your God and you shall listen to his sweet voice (VARLAAM, 2014). In this regard, the monk sees the chance of the ordinary individual's salvation by consciously practicing a profound faith in God, which brings balance and moderation: *"Because there are many kinds of pride that are being divided. Not only in the mundane things, such as wealth, virtue, beauty or craft, but also in the ones related to the soul, such as prayers during fasting times, cadge and other good deeds. If I wear good clothes, I am great, if I wear bad clothes, I am still great, due to my soul"* (VARLAAM, 2014). The social effect of such Christian education can only be beneficial. Moderation and measure in everything represent the middle road which should be the basis of the earthly existential pattern of the human being, therefore preparing him for a similarly balanced and tranquil afterlife.

One can notice the references that the bishop makes to the country hospodar's choosing criteria. The general portrait painted by Vaarlam to the man who rules the destinies of a country opens the way of associating the monk with the supreme earthly value. He has to be chosen among physical and moral beautiful people, therefore connecting the idea of a dynasty in time with the supernatural perfection – an expression of power and authority – with the talent of the monk, reflected in the complementarity of the beauty of his face and soul, for him and for the ones who come-next-after him to the throne. These qualities certify in some way, the hospodar's mission of making only good deeds for his people, according to the divine structure: *a flock and a shepherd*, offering a moral model to his people. The ethical vocation of Varlaam's Homily is obvious, adjusting the aesthetical component of the work.

6. INSTEAD OF CONCLUSION

The hagiographic legend aura of the bishop Varlaam's writings is built into an incredible balance between the well-known saints of the orthodox world and the local ones – as to present them using a term that refers to their earthly existence in the geographical area of Moldova. There are two very significant examples of this: the

life of Saint Ioancel Nou from Suceava and that of Saint Parascheva from Iasi. Another virtue of Varlaam's writing is the attention given to the folkloric traditions, supported by his belief that the popular creation elements define the autochthonism and consolidate the church's culturalization effect on the masses. Therefore, combining the Byzantine intellectual tradition with the cultural spirit our folk culture, capitalising on the scholars' model of those times, creates a crossing bridge from the dogma to the humanist culture, using the Romanian language and the modeling virtues of metaphor. This idea, that culturally enriched the 17th century, is not completely original. It is known that the sources of the writing in the Slavonic language present influences that stem from the popular culture as well as beneficial contaminations with other dogmatic writing of the era, building a general elevated framework of religious coagulation, as a state of grace for the human being.

Varlaam's work can be included in the spirit of the Christian doctrine, but it also presents that particular mark which places it within the national space, representing a conciliation exercise between the dogma and cultural liberty, archetypical anchored in the medieval culture.

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