

LAURA LAZĂR ZĂVĂLEANU, *Locul unde odihnește cerul. Timpul și spațiul în literatura română veche* [The Place where the Sky rests. Time and Space in the Ancient Romanian Literature] (Bucharest: Pro Universitaria, 2023), 366 p.

Laura Lazăr Zăvăleanu confesses that this book is a plea for the topicality of pre-modern literature in which everything that contemporary literary writing wishes to return to is concentrated. In order to be more convincing, the author has supplemented the analytical tools of the literary historian and critic with image analysis. By bringing together in a unitary and complementary whole both the eloquence of the text and that of the iconography of the period, she has achieved what the subjects of her research also intended, namely, to restore natural communication between the divine and the human element. This perspective of a scholarly approach individualizes the work within the Romanian-language segment of the history of mentalities which has produced numerous reference works over the past few decades.

A first consequence of this method is the close relationship proposed in the introductory chapter of the book *Philosophical-literary toponymies in Antiquity and the Middle Ages. The persistence of memory: Romanian recurrences*, between the representation of the Tree of Jesse in Byzantine iconography and the illustrations in the earliest universal histories or Bibles illuminated with *tabulae generationum* dating from the tenth to twelfth centuries. In these illustrations, timelines and commentaries emphasizing the Old Testament origin of the genealogy of Jesus are associated with miniatures illustrating important figures and moments in biblical history. Using the tree to represent time, generational cycles and, implicitly, history, these illustrations regain, and capitalize on, its multiple semantics: the tree of life and death, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which oscillates between Creation and Parousia, between the loss of Paradise and the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

The subsequent symbiosis between the-biblical narrative and the universal chronicle, whereby one's own short-lived time is integrated into the time of Salvation, ensured a long-lasting success for family tree representations. They were also enhanced by their didactic concreteness, thanks to which extremely wide-ranging information was able to be condensed and organized but also made easier to memorize by exploiting the affective impact of the images. The moral and ethical stakes of the texts found a reliable ally in the images which, "updated" by the introduction in the illustrated scenes of contemporary protagonists, often those who commissioned the volumes, gave them a sense of belonging to the Christian genealogy and made them aware of their intrinsic importance in the effort to pass on knowledge from one generation to the next.

Analyzed from this perspective with an explicit political function, in fact a claim to the hereditary right to rule, the manuscript chosen as an example, entitled *The Faces of the Old and New Testament*, written in 1709 by Antim Ivireanul (Antim the Iberian) is closely akin to the "genealogical proclamation" of the voivode Constantin Brâncoveanu already identified by Răzvan Theodorescu in the pictorial programme of the large church of the Horezu Monastery.¹ And suddenly, when read in this way, all the chronographs, chronicles, texts of moral edification, popular novels, hagiographies and illuminations compiled and published in the Romanian space are focused on an exit from a time of decrepitude, so that, through the exemplary biographies submitted for consideration, the reader's horizon can become aware of God's eternity.



¹ Răzvan Theodorescu, *Civilizația românilor între medieval și modern* [Romanian Civilization between the Medieval and Modern Periods] (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1987), 89.

The world's and mankind's time of existence requires tools to measure and anticipate its impact on Man. So as to make them accessible, *Calendars, Zodiacs, Gromovnice*,¹ *Trepetnice*² were compiled, in which the attempt to harmonize the cyclical, pre-Christian time with linear time, which began with Creation and will end with the Last Judgment, was vainly opposed by the Church. In the background, the proliferation of forms of artistic expression inspired by this same Occidental culture, resulting in numerous illustrations of the ages of man/of life, focused on the message of the inconstancy and continuous rotation of the wheel of the world/wheel of life, reveals the importance of problematizing, also in this part of the world, the concepts of psychological time, social time, the anguish of death, specific to modern times, where the perception of time has increasingly become dependent on the means designed to measure human action.

To recover, as proposed in chapter II, *The auroral chronotope, the Foundations architecture*, Laura Lazăr Zăvăleanu undertakes an exclusively literary journey focalized on the second object of her discourse, i.e. space, and more precisely the search for that realm forbidden to our gaze, “*the place where the sky rests*”,³ in direct communication with the divinity. The appearance of space can only be expressed by words, it evades even the gaze of artists, so that no delimitation by colour can be used. The combination of both space and time becomes profitable, however. Thus, in their efforts to integrate local history into the concept of cosmogony, the Wallachian chroniclers claimed the divine attributes of the Demiurge, repeating the sacred pattern of the Book of Creation when they updated in writing the most remote ages of their ancestors' history. Like God, the all-knowing, they created “*in their own image and likeness*” the founders who took possession of this Earth, organizing it according to the perfect model of the heavenly world. That is, they distributed the conquered territories to their companions, they built churches in the shape of Noah's ark, they designed cities and towns taking heavenly Jerusalem as a reference, and – as God's representatives on Earth – their deeds were beautiful and good, true works of art reflected in the representations of Genesis on the facades of the churches in the north of Moldavia.

Capitalizing on the interpretations of previous researchers, Laura Lazăr Zăvăleanu adds an analysis of the Romanian chronicles' concerns about Romanians constructing themselves as descendants of the Scriptures, integrated into the history of Creation.

Because it is the only legitimating time, it is from it that they bring down those who “by putting their foot down” (*descălecatul*), founded (instituted) order within a matrix space on the archetypal model offered by the biblical text. The chroniclers thus proceeded to a re-creation and appropriation of the historical space and time, i.e. of the place where the history of salvation unfolds. The act of writing by the authors of the chronicles became synonymous with the integration of Romanians into an interdependent whole thanks to their common origins in the biblical texts: the people of God, culminating in the unfulfilled ambition of the scholar prince Dimitrie Cantemir to compile a complete history of the world since its creation. An ambition fulfilled already a century earlier, however, by Mihail Moxa / Moxalie, a member of the monastic order of Bistrița (Vâlcea County), who in 1620 compiled the first universal chronicle in Romanian.

As Laura Lazăr Zăvăleanu observes in the chapter on “The Historical Chronotope: From the perspective of the whole to the miniature detail of everyday life”, the artistic counterpart to these historical-literary concerns is echoed in the inclusion in the iconographic programmes of the period of the Acatist to the mother of God with particular emphasis on the episode of the siege of Constantinople in 626. The blending of the worlds in this scene, often interpreted as a re-enactment of the siege of 1453, was the means by which the Virgin Mary's help in the anti-Ottoman struggle was visually invoked. Likewise for the Cavalcade of the Holy Cross depicted at Pătrăuți, in which attention is drawn to the Archangel Michael and the other military saints who surround and follow the Holy

¹ Astrology books that predicts the future based on the thunder.

² Books that predict the future based on the involuntary tremor of body parts.

³ An expression derived from *The Story of the three Holy Fathers, Sergius, Riginos and Theophilus* in *The Lives and Celebrations of Saints*, published by the metropolitan Dosoftei in Iași between 1682 and 1686.

Emperor Constantine, founder of the Byzantine Empire under the sign of Christianity, whose symbolic presence in the Romanian votive frescoes by Stephen the Great and Petru Rareș conveys the idea that the fight for the faith will be continued by the Romanian voivodes who represent themselves as hereditary basileis. With the same aim, i.e. that of resisting the advance of the Turks, a preference also emerges for illustrating the celestial hierarchies and the Tree of Jesse, an attempt to comply with the requirement based on belonging to an illustrious ancestry, the continuation of which becomes a political imperative. At the end of this visual work, the illustrations in the manuscripts of the chronologists, in which the echoes of the indigenous immediacy overwhelm the eye to the detriment of the splendors described by the text, demonstrate the exemplary mobility of the artists in their ability to move continuously between different spaces and temporalities.

Moving into the realm of the books of wisdom, reading, recounting and even multiplying them by copying or printing them turns out to be alternatives to experiencing reality, as the chapter on “The topochrony of popular books: kalokagathy and otherness show.” Indeed, by providing access to knowledge, beauty and delight, these books were supposed to cure us of our daily labour and even offer us a key to happiness, through the models of spatial-temporal diversity brought to our attention. By mixing myth, fantasy, magic and reality, these texts constitute an enlightenment based on morality, wisdom and behaviour, and initiate into the sacred both in and through love. Their reader can escape, and take possession of spaces, places and times which are only accessible through imagination. The scene of the Last Judgment depicted in the exterior paintings of churches visually reflects this. Likewise, the icon of the Hospitality of Abraham, the cycles of the life of a saint, the synaxaria illustrated in their entirety in certain Moldavian churches, the miniatures and, why not, the initials decorated with birds and mythical animals that are scattered throughout the manuscripts?

An analysis of the spatial and temporal dimensions in our ancient literature would not be complete if it did not also dwell upon the writing itself as a safe space, the only means capable of preserving facts and of thus ensuring they are imprinted in one’s everlasting temporal memory as noticed in the last chapter of the book – “From the space-time of being, to the space-time of writing and reading.”

The writer’s relationship with the written text as a space-time of an eternity scaled down to human proportions also forms the subject of the research, the reason of the investigation being to focus on the facts seen and experienced by those who relate them in writing. Visual guarantee is an exercise in time hoarding. The writer realizes his work in a time and space that have a decisive influence on the content and appearance of the text, but also on the expectations of his readers. Narrators, aware of their creative contribution, sometimes insinuate themselves into the narrative as actors, in the same manner as the scribe sometimes depicts himself in illuminated self-portraits as a copyist and illustrator of the text.

Deciphered in this way, as an attempt to heal the world through words (the divine Word of course) at the very moment it was conceived, through a skillfully written text, at a time when its message is being called into question, ancient Romanian literature reveals its truly remarkable propaedeutic dimensions, unfairly severed with the transition from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet. The renunciation of the old graphic garb, as well as of actual clothing, with its oriental cut and forms, abandoned around the same period, both of which were totally replaced after the Revolution of 1848, condemned the old books to uselessness, then to oblivion and abandonment in the reserves of museums and libraries, where their status as veritable treasures renders access to them very difficult even for the initiated few.

It is therefore not surprising that their message can always be reinvented because society will always need to heal its fear of the unknown, of the chaos of a world which, through the progress of science, has long since surpassed the limits of the atom and the universe and has an even greater need to be re-tamed so as to overcome the “terrible times” in which humanity has never ceased to live. God himself is waiting to be “brought home” among humanity, and words still seem to have remained the surest way to succeed in such an adventure, despite the over-technologization of civilization. Laura Lazăr Zăvăleanu’s book seriously raises the question of the direction to take to access that said Word: by pursuing the path and reinventing it in an uncertain future, after which there would be

Reviews

other expectations for experimentation and validation, or else by returning to a treasure that has proven its effectiveness for centuries?

While the first path seems more natural, the second seems safer, but both require space and time: a virtual space, of unrestricted accessibility, made possible by scanning technologies, but also an academic space, of debate, in which ancient literature should regain its period of action, so that new generations of researchers can benefit from the possibility of gaining deeper insight, and from the chance to open up the horizon of knowledge so that it can be of use to both those who, having set out in search of the Word, will want to move forward, and those who will want to go back.

Laura Lazăr Zăvăleanu has chosen to return, and her book is the most eloquent proof that she has made the right choice. Gifted with the tenacity necessary to follow the details and reconstruct the surrounding context, Laura Lazăr Zăvăleanu is a born storyteller who skillfully rebuilds bridges between worlds, and thus balances periods and characters that were incompatible in their time. Like the primordial Logos, she gives and restores life through words and image/imagination, displaying before the reader's eyes a historical and geographical whole that aspires to universality. A vast fresco depicted both by references to concrete works of art and by appealing to the reader's ability to transform the text into a world of his own, in which he can lose himself in order to heal himself of everyday frustrations and prejudices and from which he can return avid for knowledge and eager to address the sources himself and extract even more beauty out of them. In concrete terms, Laura Lazăr Zăvăleanu provides her reader with the ability to recognize in our ancient literature an authentic work of art whose aesthetic value has been concealed for too long due to the lack of interest of its researchers for the authenticity of the experience and the complexity of the vision of the worlds which the ancient writers have incorporated into their writings.

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