

Glossolalia and Perichoresis. Vasile Voiculescu's Religious Poetry

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Résumé : *Vasile Voiculescu est le poète roumain qui fait preuve d'une grande sensibilité religieuse. La poésie intitulée « Glossolalie sur la Sainte Trinité » constitue, en réalité, une présentation lyrique du dogme central du christianisme, une présentation versifiée de la périchorèse des personnes divines. La Trinité chrétienne est le mystère d'un seul Dieu en trois hypostases ou personnes égales et participant à une même substance. Les Trois Personnes se compénètrent mutuellement, la périchorèse nous relève l'interpénétration des Personnes divines les unes dans les autres dans l'unité de l'Amour parfait.*

Mots clés : *sensibilité religieuse, christianisme, Vasile Voiculescu*

Literature can hardly ignore the religious dimension of human beings. A religious person is he who relates himself to deity and to his neighbors under the form of love. Vasile Voiculescu was a person who lived in the horizon of charity (*Deus caritas est*), a poet of great religious sensitivity who highlighted in his work, although not very rich but impressive and profound, the relationship between poetry and the Christian dogma, between literary creation and theology.

A traditionalist¹ and representative of thoughtful orthodoxy, as some of his critics characterize him, Vasile Voiculescu, is, perhaps, the poet with "the most obvious religious inclination" in the Romanian literature between the two World Wars².

In his book, „Poezia lui Vasile Voiculescu”, Liviu Grăsoiu makes an inventory of the positive appreciations referring to the poet³. Thus, while Al. Dima includes Voiculescu among the "seniors of contemporary poetry", Vladimir Streinu sees him "in the group of the traditionalists of World War I, who kept upright things in our lyricism". Making reference to the religious thread in Voiculescu's works, Vladimir Streinu claims that Voiculescu and Arghezi are the great "poets of the Romanian religious inspiration". Creator of thoughtfulness, Nichifor Crainic, in turn, claims that Voiculescu's poetry would be "a materialization of the ineffable able to be better than the poems of Juan de la Cruz", and the poet "integrates himself right in the orthodox faith so as Paul Claudel integrates himself in Catholicism through his liturgical hymns and odes". The poet's religiousness, T. Vianu writes, "is not made of a calm and happy reconciliation of man with God. It is rather the echo of a fight with himself, of a state of spirit which, starting from the feeling of an insight tragic desert, aspires to come back to God."

Dinu Pillat confesses that he discovered in the writer the man "seemingly descending from the depth and from afar, inside whom the peasant of old extraction has never fully urbanized himself", the man "with the basic features of a mystic, but paradoxically doubled by a casuist with a rational critical spirit", the man who would live the life of a saint and who would understand "all vanity of life"⁴. The poet mostly lived in isolation, valuing austerity, constantly investigating his own self, concerned with what is insight and secretive; Voiculescu's poetry is a special kind of poetry focused on the value of human insight character. The mystic is indeed a first rank coordinate of the human insight.

The poet of restless reflexivity, Vasile Voiculescu reveals through his entire literary creation the image of a man trying to spiritually rally himself to God. The Bible was the food that had nourished his literary production since its early manifestations. It is natural for things to be like that as long as the poet was given a sound religious education in his childhood. The writer himself confesses: "Out of all my readings, it was the Bible which impressed me mostly, with its rough grandeur of half earthly and half divine drama... I

knew the Old Testament form cover to cover like an epos, so that the idyllic Gospel, in my case, stood hidden by shadows till rather late”⁵.

Ion Buzăși says that Lucian Blaga, the great poet, compared Vasile Voiculescu’s style with John the Baptist’s. In fact, very many of Vasile Voiculescu’s poems have biblical episodes as their starting point, relieving the human beings’ aspiration to accomplish themselves through their genuine meeting God, to purify themselves by walking on the way of delivering sufferance to the end of it. His medical education and his philosophical readings, instead of estranging him from his religious faith, brought him closer: the writer was convinced that it is faith which must underlie every normal man’s spirit⁶.

Religious topics extensively populate Voiculescu’s poetry. And so do his biblical evocations. The poet speaks about *shepherds* and *magi*, about *the paradise lost*, he sends his readers to the *merciful and miracle-making icon*, and he frequently mentions the presence of angels. Actually, angels populate Voiculescu’s poetry without limitations. They practically frame everything pertaining the festive moments of Christmas and Easter, of pray, of confession by the chosen and confessors of the Gospel, of the Advent, of Adam’s fall, of Death on the Cross, of resurrection, salvation and the Final Judgment.

The God Voiculescu refers to is a merciful and masterful God; He is God (*Dominus*), the Father, God Most High, a creator and Saviour God. The Divinity to whom Voiculescu’s poetry is directed and towards whom it also directs us, its receptors, is a Trinitarian divinity. The proof is in such poems as *Glosolalie despre Sfânta Treime* (*Glossolalia about the Holy Trinity*), *Inimă a lui Dumnezeu* (*Heart of God*), *Treime* (*The Trinity*), *Știu, fără ca să-O pricep* (*I Know without Being Able to Understand It*), *Crucea Treimii* (*The Trinity Cross*), *Colindul Crăciunului* (*The Christmas Carol*).

Let us remember the first poem, dated 1954: “Neither chain, nor blending of places and lay; / Nor mysterious organ thrice outcried; / Have chambers, they are one, and in itself, each one / Is in the others, entire, in its eternal meaning; / And travels alive, free in its immobile state, / In everything, suddenly the same, in themselves with no change / Molten without blending, intertwining loves / In a unique all-embracing will. / Fearfully the cherubim are led into temptation and are still / Unworthy of attaining the power of height / Of deciphering the alien, flashingly deep, superhuman syntax of the Trinity. / Underneath, only revealing its Glory and Strength, / The Light becomes embodied and gets hegemony”.

To the poet, Jesus Christ represents the heart of God and the sweet flash of the Holy Trinity. This image is suggested by the poem *Heart of God*, wherein the author implores divine receptiveness through his prayer: “You, Jesus Christ, Heart of God, / who overdrink the blood of Father to the depth/ Open yourself to our shy prayers/ Sweet flash of the mysterious Trinity”.

The poem *Trinity* (1953), speaks about how the Trinity comes into the poet’s dream, the divinity of the Son being emphatically underlined through the intermediary of the cosmic proportions of the Crucifixion: “I dreamt the icon of the mysterious Trinity / A Cross with three arms open over the world / Two upwards and sideways towards the height / One to the abysses gone downward. // On the right there sits the Father, on the left the Holy Spirit / And weighing them both their upsurge / On the middle in the sky the Son, oh crucified / The earth caressing with his feet”.

Although the divine trinity is inaccessible to human understanding, the poet makes the Trinity the basis of his faith and of his life. A poem dated 1954 which serves for vivid proof says: “I know, without understanding It, the Trinity / And on It my life I lay / As I believe with all my profundity/ My heart that I cannot see. / Its secret, infatigable work / In a wound showed itself to me: the unceasing life giving / Blood, in three faces, but

inseparable...” (*I Know without Being Able to Understand It*). Jesus’s cross is the Trinity Cross, praised cross, a remedy cross, a remedy for any “dirty wound” (*The Remedy-Cross*, 1954). The trinity truth is accessible to the poet as a truth of the Resurrection: “To know something of You, circle to carve you in the stair / With the Holy Spirit I mount to the Son, through the Son to Father I mount. / Your Trinity Shuts You ... And You stay outside too: / The clothes are there; He who wears them is not” (*Agony*, 1958). An inner truth, insight assimilated and at the same time associated to Christmas is felt in: “body, are you sleeping? Is sleep about to conquer you? / “The Grace from God” / Soul, wake up and learn / “The Grace from God” / From the Palace of Trinity / In the cave of the heart. (*The Christmas Carol*, 1956).

Voiculescu’s orthodoxy and mysticism are not elements of the scenery, they are not purely decorative. The poem *Glossolalia about the Holy Trinity* has a special theological consistency. The poetic discourse is at the same time a dogmatic discourse: the *Glossolalia about the Holy Trinity* is actually a presentation in verse of the central dogma of Christianity, the dogma of the Holy Trinity, it is a lyrical presentation of the divine perichoresis.

Let us remember the teaching referring to the divine Trinity. And let us do that, mainly, on the basis of Eastern resources, in order to be in agreement with the poet’s religious orientation. God is one being in three persons or hypostases: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Our God is a Trinitarian God, in God there is the unity of being and personal diversity. The three persons share the same nature, they share the possession of the same divine nature, and the divine nature cannot be comprehended by the human mind, it is incomprehensible, incognoscible. God is above everything that exists, above all that exists, above all that lives in the universe; *Dogmatica* by John of Damascus does begin with two biblical illustrative quotations from John 1:18 and Matthew 11:27: “No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known,” and “No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (NIV). Probably this is the way we realize properly why the syntax of the Trinity places itself above beings and as such, and brilliant, blinding (see also Isaiah 6: 1-3) it is inaccessible even to the angels: “Fearfully cherubim are led into temptation and are still / Unworthy of attaining the power of height / Of deciphering the alien, flashingly deep, superhuman syntax of the Trinity”.

To a Christian to believe in the Holy Trinity means to believe in one deity, power, willingness (i.e., will as the poet expresses himself), activity, mastering, ruling, to relate to it through one worship. Why one worship? Because, according to the word of John of Damascus, the hypostases are united without getting mixed and distinct without separating from one another⁷.

God is unchanging; he is an essence which exists in three hypostases. God is love (1 John 4:8), that is a tri-personal communion of accomplished love. In the Romanian cultural space this aspect was especially dealt with by Dumitru Stăniloae, the famous orthodox theologian. In *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă* he refers to Gregory’s words: “But for us God is one, because one is also the deity, and all those in Him refer to this unity, even if it is threefold”. God is a tri-personal, a unit of some persons who are equal as beings, equal in power, dignity and glory. In the Three, the deity is not separated and it is entire. That is, it looks like “a unique and indistinct light in three suns in a reciprocal interiority”⁸. Welcome to us do seem, in this context, the words of another Father of the Church, Basil the Great, who shows that in the divine hypostases the being is not dispersed, in the Persons of the Holy Trinity one seeing “a continuous and infinite community”, that is the lack of any gradation “which could be a space between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Because there is nothing to intervene in between, no other subsisting thing, except

the godly nature, to be able to separate it through the insertion of something foreign, nor the void of an existence without subsistence, which could result in a fissure in the entirety of the divine being, thus interrupting the continuity through the insertion of the void”⁹: between the persons of the Holy Trinity there is a continuity of nature.

Dumitru Stăniloae highlighted the fact that divine persons are mutually and totally transparent in the interiority of a perfect love. Each divine hypostasis shares with the other Two the bearing of the entire nature, through this the hypostases being *fully internal*. This is what we call *perichoresis*. As mentioned in the theology dictionary by Ion Bria, perichoresis is the movement of love and the interpenetration of the Hypostases inside the Trinitarian life. In other words, when we say the Holy Trinity we refer to three hypostases, divine persons or egos “that find themselves in one another and communicate mutually”. Perichoresis signifies the life based on love inside the Trinity; and so correctly indeed would Vasile Voiculescu write about Those who are “molten without blending”, about “intertwining loves”.

The basic idea about perichoresis is the following: “Each subject of the Trinity has the Other Two inside”. The same way of describing this is to be found with Dumitru Stăniloae. He mentions an intersubjective Trinity, each hypostasis seeing Itself in relation with the Other or inside the Other. “Father cannot see Himself but a subject of love towards the Son. But the Father’s Ego does not lose Himself through this, for he is affirmed by the Son, Who in turn, does not know of Himself but as fulfilling His Father’s will. [...] This is the movement of each Ego around the Other as a centre (περιχώρησις=circumcessio)”¹⁰. The Holy Trinity is the one and only God, not in the sense of confusion, but in the sense of their mutual interpenetration, without confusion (cf. John 14:11). In this way, *unity* and *difference* are preserved. The hypostases live in one another, and their interpenetration is without confusion; the hypostases do not get lost, they do not dissolve and they do not lose their own identity in this union. As the poet writes, the three “do not have chambers, they are one; and in Oneself, each / is in the others” with the whole, with its fully Whole meaning.

To Voiculescu, religion did not only constitute a happy opportunity of a consistent poetic reflection but also a real support in the day-by-day life. It represented a walk of life. Vasile Voiculescu was a really humane person, austere and modest, a lucid and determined conscience of the 20th century, a person who lived far from the honours and advantages of profitable times as well as from the political compromises of some misty times.

NOTES

¹ For the traditionalism of Voiculescu’s poetry see the work of V. Voiculescu *în orizontul tradiționalismului*, pp. 18 and the following. We suggest reservation in reading this paper.

² Crohmălniceanu, Ov. S., *Literatura română între cele două războaie mondiale*, vol. II, Ed. Minerva, București, 1974, p. 285, apud Mircea Braga, *op. cit.*, p. 8. Ov. S. Crohmălniceanu’s opinion seems justified to us.

³ Grăsoiu, Liviu, *Poezia lui Vasile Voiculescu*, pp. 16 and the following.

⁴ Pillat, Dinu, *Vasile Voiculescu la epoca genezei povestirilor*, in *Vasile Voiculescu*. Antologie, prefață, tabel cronologic, bibliografie critică selectivă de Rodica Pandeale, pp. 30-31.

⁵ *Confesiunile unui scriitor și medic*, *Gândirea*, no. 8/1935, apud Ion Buzași, *Poezia religioasă românească*, p. 173.

⁶ *Confesiunea unui scriitor și medic*, in V. Voiculescu, *Gânduri albe*, Ed. Cartea Românească, 1986, apud Florentin Popescu, *Viața lui Vasile Voiculescu*, p. 123.

⁷ Damaschin, Ioan, *Dogmatica*, p. 24.

⁸ Grigory of Nazianzus, *Oratio XXX*, apud Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1, p. 301. Dumitru Stăniloae writes that John of Damascus used the same type of wording in his *Dogmatica*: the three interweaving suns are “only one light” (my translation is based on a quotation from *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, p. 301). See also Gregory of Nazianzus, *Cele 5 cuvântări teologice*, p. 103: „the deity is not separated into Those who distinguish themselves [...]. It is a unique light in three suns which mutually penetrate each other, without melting into each other”.

⁹ Basil the Great, *Epistola 38*, apud *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, pp. 301-302.

¹⁰ *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, p. 317.

¹¹ For a western perspective on perichoresis, we suggest Bertrand de Margerie's *La Trinité chrétienne dans l'histoire*, pp. 244 and the following. The Catholic theologian says that perichoresis, or the mutual immanence of the divine persons, is seen by the Council of Florence as a consequence - the unity of their substance. This is Fulgence's way of seeing things, in a manner adopted by the Florentine Council: "Due to this unity of nature, the Father is fully in the Son and in the Holy Spirit; the Son is fully in the Father and in the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is fully in the Father and in the Son" (my translation is based on a quotation from Bertrand de Margerie, *op. cit.*, pp. 244-245). Hillary de Poitiers also insists on perichoresis in *De Trinitate* VII, 28 (Hilaire de Poitiers, *La Trinité*, p. 343), and Thomas d'Aquino describes perichoresis as an interpenetration or intradivine intersubjectivity (Bernard de Margerie, *op. cit.*, p. 250). The reality of the perichoresis is described by Thomas d'Aquino in essential terms: "Father is in the Son because Father is His essence and which He communicates to His Son without the slightest modification; Father's essence being in the Son, it results that Father is in the Son. And because the Son is His essence, it also results that the Son is in Father inside Whom is His own essence" (*Summa Teologică*, I, 42.5, apud *ibid.*, p. 251). The doctrine concerning the perichoresis is extremely important in theology since it constitutes an obstacle against any form of tritheism or modalism. Reformed theology did not neglect this doctrinary point. In his work *Systematic Theology* (vol. I, pp. 461-462) Charles Hodge discusses the mutual relationship of the divine Persons, suggesting the Latin terms corresponding to the Greek *perichoresis*: *inexistentia*, *inhabitatio*, *intercommunio*. All these terms were intended to show that where there is one divine hypostasis the other two are also present. The American theologian concludes, „The fact –of the intimate union, communion, and inhabitation of the persons of the Trinity – is the reason why everywhere in Scripture, and instinctively by all Christians, God as God is addressed as a person, in perfect consistency with the Tripersonality of the Godhead" (*ibid.*, p. 462).

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