
DIMITRIE CANTEMIR AND THE CONQUEST OF RATIONALISM

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Abstract

In his first two works, D. Cantemir combines Philosophy and Theology and adopts a clear Christian-like position, recommending the spiritual values together with the disregard for the worldly temptations, and considering that the only possible way of knowing is the direct contact with God, which is the revelation. His attitude is an extremist one, as he rejects everything that comes from the Antique culture (Aristotle for example) and is very similar to that of the first Byzantine theologians. Very few years after writing these works, he composes an allegory, *The Hieroglyphic History*, in which he proves to be a rationalist, an iconoclast, as he denies zoomorphic symbols as they were established by Christian iconography and moral treatises. The present paper tries to argue that this so-called 'rationalism' is an attempt to prove that the world he intends to depict and satirize is opposed to the world as it was created by God and as it is described in the Christian books, starting with the Bible. So, Cantemir changes the symbols in order to criticize the upside down political habits of his time. There is no conflict between his apparently rational and iconoclastic attitude and the Christian recommended manners.

Keywords: D. Cantemir, Middle Ages, Byzance, Theology, Rationalism

1. Introduction

In this work I want to compare D. Cantemir's attitude towards religion as it appears in his youth philosophical works and the iconoclast or 'rationalist' treatment of the Christian symbols he uses in his later allegory, *The Hieroglyphic History*. The first works written by the young prince Dimitrie Cantemir have acquired during time enthusiastic commentaries, being considered the first Romanian philosophical writings. Cantemir is, in this perspective, our first philosopher and the first scholar who tries to create a philosophical vocabulary in Romanian language. Yet, there is a problem with this way of seeing the old culture; one of the Romanian culture's complexes is that it was very difficult to create tradition. In the XIXth century, when the Romanian boyars travelled and studied in the Western Europe (especially in France), they realized there was a strong need to start an original Romanian culture. The most important of all programs was the one who tried to create a

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specific national tradition. Except the popular culture, there were little works to be mentioned. Among these, the chronicles were very important, even though it was Mihail Kogălniceanu who first published them at the middle of the 19th century. It was the beginning of a national feeling, of the Romanians becoming aware of their past. Yet, there were many manuscripts, most of them containing religious writings: translations of some parts of the Bible, translations of some moral books or simply compilations, 'patchworks' that gathered together lots of useful wise ideas and fragments from many religious books. The most influential of this kind of works was Varlaam's *Cazanie (Book of advice)*, published in 1643.

Therefore, in such a context, there is not a curious thing that the figure of such an erudite as Cantemir is certainly the most prominent one, as his works cover a large area of domains. So, there is a clear tendency to exaggerate the importance or even the structure and the nature of the first works written, in his prime youth, by Cantemir. Hence, there is a common statement in the commentaries that *Divanul sau Gâlceava Înțeleptului cu Lumea sau Giudețul trupului cu sufletul (The Salvation of the Wise Man and the Ruin of the Sinful World)*, the first work published by the 25 years old author, is the first philosophical work in Romanian culture. He chooses some classical themes (the superiority of the soul and of the spiritual values on the body and the worldly vices; the seven ages of men and the Christian way of valuing them; the correspondence between Macrocosm and Microcosm, that is between the Universe, as a creation of God, and man, as a creature of God; the lability of life and so on). All of these are common themes among the Eastern Christian writers; actually, there is a considerable gap between this kind of works and the Philosophy, as it developed in the Western Europe, at the end of the 17th century.

2. An original work or an anthology?

The main subject and purpose of *The Salvation of the Wise Man and the Ruin of the Sinful World* is to emphasize this Christian basic idea: that the spiritual virtues are superior to the temporary ambitions a man tries to achieve in his short life. Yet, we have to notice a very important fact: Cantemir's strategy is not to disobey the Orthodox dogma, which fixed the norm in the Eastern cultures, but to use in a free manner a heterogeneous list of authors, from the Bible to the Sceptics and Aristotle (considered an enemy of the Christian faith, an example of the pagan way of thinking), from Saint Augustine to Andreas Wissowatius (an Unitarian, so a heretic), from Seneca, Cicero, and Cato to Epictetus, Hesiod, from Plato, Plutarch to Saadi, and many moral books of his time in order to substantiate that the Christian values are to be preferred to the mundane passing values, that it is compulsory to assume a Christian way of living in order to gain never-ending life and to have access to eternity. So, the nature of the arguments is not so important: they may be Christian, laic or even 'pagan'; what matters is the theory the author succeeds in proving by all these means, which might seem unfamiliar or even audacious to the Orthodox reader

of the time. Yet, we should not forget that, if his methods are different, Cantemir's work is indebted to many medieval and post-byzantine scholars that recommended the Christian solution as the only way of making worth living.

The simple gesture of facing Cantemir's first work to what happened in the Western philosophical area is due to diminish our virtual enthusiasm. I think a calm and more realistic attitude is to be preferred. That is why, if I am to choose between two different points of view, one that tries to prove that *Divanul* is a philosophical work that marks the dawns of the Romanian philosophical discourse and another one that is more temperate in this aspect, I will make my option for the second one. Let me discuss two different opinions, so that things should be clearer. Dan Bădărău considers that *Divanul* is influenced by some general philosophical problems, not by primarily theological tasks. Yet, we have to notice that his work was published in a difficult context, when it was almost impossible to accept any Christian value, as the communist regime considered religion an enemy. Bădărău describes this work of the young prince as "the first attempt in the domain of Ethics made by a Romanian thinker in the Romanian language, according to the context specific to the Romanian society of that time (...) And it is also to mention as an endeavour to follow the humanistic laic aspirations to make peace between the religious morale and the philosophic ethics." [1] Well, I dare say it is much more than *Divanul* can manage to accomplish; actually, it is the author's way of making his name well-known in the intellectual circles of the post-byzantine culture (as the book is written in Romanian and also in Greek). Anyway, if we consider it is a philosophic work, we have to treat it in consequence. This is why I agree with Corneliu Bîlbă's opinion: "We have to start from is empirical: in 1700, Demeter Cantemir writes (in Romanian language) a philosophical text in which he treats a moral task, using a language and a set of representations that were not current in the European culture. What Cantemir says, in a quite new language – in the literary experience aspect – is a part of the 'dead end' of the Western philosophy. (...) The *episteme* that the dialogue between the Soul and the Body belongs to is exhausted." [2] This is a realistic way of raising the problem. Of course, Cantemir starts from some models, but this does not mean that he is a real philosopher, as Bacon, Descartes, Locke, Leibniz were. He is in a period of accumulation, he is still a disciple.

Therefore, if I am to answer shortly at the problem if *Divanul* is a philosophical or a theological work, I would say simply: neither of these variants is correct. It is an anthology, an attempt of imposing the author's name on the cultural scene and, in this way, on the political scene. This hypothesis is difficult to be accepted in a culture that had to live for many decades with a strong complex of its beginnings. The temptation is to turn the old works, along with their authors into fetishes. The same searcher we have just quoted, Corneliu Bîlbă, dares to propose a critical point of view that may seem to some conformist scholars iconoclast: "Cantemir was an important author in more than one culture, his work is the expression of some different interests, so that it could offer a concept of unity from a discursive point of view, and his

philosophical writings are quite ambiguous in the aspect of originality, so that they can offer a concept of author in a modern sense. Despite all these, the cultural historiography turned Cantemir into a hero of the spirit and a philosopher of European dimensions, transferring on his philosophical work something from the importance of his historical and geographical work (which were not quite revolutionary themselves!)” [2, p. 11]

3. Revelation and knowledge

The second work of the young Cantemir is more ambitious than the first one. *Sacrosanctae scientiae indepingibilis imago (The Indescribable Image of the Sacred Science)*, written in 1700, tries to construct a system that may help the thinker to find out a way to reach the complete knowledge. The main influence is his *maître à penser*, the Flemish philosopher, chemist, physiologist, and physician Jan Baptist van Helmont, an influent, but controversial personality of the 17th century. Yet, the young Cantemir does not quote the works of van Helmont at all, even if some commentators noticed that this work is very few original, being in a huge degree indebted to van Helmont's ideas and theories, actually, two chapters from *Sacrosanctae scientiae* are variants, lightly transformed, of some works written by the Flemish scholar: *Meteoron Anomalum* and *Terrae Tremor* [3]. Cantemir also writes in Latin, as his magister. Yet, the essence of this metaphysical work is the first part, which tries to construct a Christian gnoseology. In his attempt to reach the real knowledge, the human being fails when choosing the classical methods: the sensitive one (getting aware of the truth of the universe helped by the senses) and the rationalist one (acquiring real knowledge by means of the intellect). Cantemir uses strong collocations like “the sick of the profane knowledge”, “the absurd and almost indemonstrable principles of the sensitive knowledge”, “the helpless art”, “the ignorant knowledge”, or “the darkness of reason” [4]. For Cantemir, the only solution to reach a real and profound knowledge is to ask through prayers the access to it. Hence, what he calls the ‘sacred science’, the one and only knowledge, is possible by means of the direct contact with God; that is, through revelation. It is the only chance to realize a correct portrait of the Truth. So, God is the only plausible source of knowledge; the man gets to knowledge only by God's almighty and will. Everything that comes from the laic world or from direct experience is anathematized as dangerous to the spirit. Such a radical attitude is not common in the Eastern philosophy, which became aware of the utility of the antique works and used Aristotle, for example, and all the Stoics in order to get to Christian conclusion.

Cantemir's attitude is much closer to that of the first byzantine theologians, among which Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Saint John of Damascus, Saint Basil the Great or Tertullian. Those early Christian thinkers rejected Philosophy as a pagan and needless domain, dangerous as it could deceive man so that he could believe that he can trust his reason and that he could have access to the secrets of God's intentions. Basile Tatakis, the author of

a classical work on the Byzantine philosophy, resumes properly the whole debate: “The aim of reason does not seem another but to get to a certain understanding of Revelation. (...) The Christian reason gets life and becomes concrete due to an order that overcomes it; it does not pretend that it is self-sufficient; the accomplishment of its mission doesn’t depend only in it. It also needs the divine light and grace. In consequence, the Christian reason doesn’t move in a field of pure reason, of autonomy; it isn’t a self-thinking knowledge; on the contrary, it is a reason that has to continuously make efforts to overcome itself, as a human reason, in order to touch this final reason that is the only true one: God Himself.” [5] This is an attitude the young Cantemir would have considered familiar.

So, the first works of Cantemir are not philosophical writings, as they do not succeed in proposing a clear system, but bring together information, ideas and even whole pages from different authors. The young prince does not propose a theory of him, but tries to take an opportunist position, according to the context of his time, in the Eastern Europe. He is not a real theologian, as he mixes things and does not obey literally the orthodox dogma. The two youth works we have discussed are bare exercises on his way to the mature works.

4. The conquest of ‘Rationalism’

This maturity begins with his allegory *The Hieroglyphic History*, written in 1705. With this novel, the apprenticeship stage ends. Cantemir becomes an autonomous author, who dares to have a ludic and apparently irreverent attitude towards some religious aspects that he worshiped in his two first books. His philosophy and his attitude have changed in only five years. In his earlier works of Philosophy, Cantemir obeys the Eastern Christian tradition and makes Theology and Philosophy a single domain. He also endeavours to be not a good philosopher, but a good Christian. This is a medieval way of thinking. Yet, when he comes to write his novel, a genre more permissive and more open to a ludic perspective, he denies all these ideas and becomes a totally laic and even profane writer. Dimitrie Cantemir evolves from the initial conception based on the Christian ethics to iconoclast rationalism. The Moldavian prince is no longer the prisoner of his time’s medieval conception, as he makes every symbol and information about animals pass an acid rational exam. His attitude towards tradition (i.e. *the Bible*, *The Physiologus*, Albert Magnus, Aelian, Aesop, Pliny the Elder, Isidor of Seville and so on) is no longer a dogmatic one, revealing a blind belief in the forces of destiny or divinity, but one of a Modern man who trusts his capacity to search and find out answers on his own. It is a new age of knowledge, very original if we think it happens in the Eastern part of Europe. In his allegory, attaching zoomorphic masks to his characters, Cantemir refers to a symbolic tradition that he misreads, turning some fundamental Christian symbols into bare pretexts for his pamphlet. The Moldavian author’s main contribution is the fact that he often changes the dominant representation of some animals, breaking up with the biblical tradition and also with his own ideas, developed in his earlier books. Choosing to attach zoomorphic masks to

his real characters, Cantemir knows very well that he starts a dialogue with a huge symbolic tradition; he knows, so to say, that in this large domain that is the religious imaginary, there is no place for arbitrary usage of symbols. The author himself confesses his position in the preface of his allegory: intending to reveal some mean facts from the underground of the history, some events that he considers to usurp his real rights to become king of Moldavia, Cantemir resorts to a ready-made symbolic system, being mindful of suiting the signification of every symbol with the reality of every person he depicts, moving him from the logic of history into the logic of fiction. And that's what he pretends: that he is willing to respect a certain tradition that he is aware of, and that he wants to take advantage of. If this confession proved true, the author would have entered his name on a large list of writers who were respectful of this allegorical 'custom', available during the Middle Ages, and also during the Baroque and even the Illuminist period of the European culture.

In the very same place, in his preface, Cantemir explains that the physical features of any zoomorphic mask reveals its full significance only when these physical characteristics are interpreted in a spiritual key. It is only when the character acts and shows his real 'nature' that the physical features prove to be symptoms of his temperamental and ethical traits. Cantemir constantly uses this device and he also lets it out. For example, the Falcon explains to the Raven, in the 10th chapter of the book, the way this method works: "And it is not only that in the *Hieroglyphic History* your name is Raven, but your body and soul and all that define you are as this name characterizes you" [6]. So, the black of the feathers becomes the sign of the character's treachery. Cantemir produces a special system of attaching the masks according to the role of any character; yet, these masks are well-known religious symbols. Of course, this method is not far from the medieval mentality, based on the allegorical interpretation of any objective fact or behaviour. The problem is that Cantemir doesn't obey this rule every time; actually he breaks it very often; often enough to make us think it is not the result of the hazard, but a deliberate strategy.

Looking closer to the problem, Cantemir's relation with the Christian zoomorphic symbols is not as simple as it may seem. He has at hand a symbolical tank built up, during time, under the crucial influence of Christian hermeneutics, but also an older one, belonging to the pre-Christian culture of Antiquity. His encyclopaedic structure allowed him to consult other sources, antique, medieval or contemporary, coming from the Western Europe or from the exotic Orient. His way of treating these sources is a modern one, as he seems to compose a critical or even iconoclastic attitude towards the normative medieval iconographic and written representations of animals, which were symbols with a powerful impact and a great influence. He seems to have the rare courage to change and misread some of these religious symbols that had their certain authority, as they belong to a system imposed by the *Bible* or by the *Physiologos*, by the bestiaries and medieval encyclopaedias, by the Christian iconography or by the moralizing literature. Shortly, these were the sources of an older episteme, the medieval one, which was actually living in the Eastern

Europe. To pick up some concrete examples, many of Cantemir's animal characters deny and even have a polemic attitude towards their regular representation in the religious symbolic system available in the Middle Ages. The bat becomes a positive character, as long as in the Christian bestiary it is a member of the Devil's menagerie; the Wolf becomes the image of the wisdom, being a Stoic and in this way coming in conflict with its image of the 'diabolic' and fiercely beast that terrorized the men of the Middle Ages; the Beaver, which is the emblem of the abstinence and a real model for any monk, becomes a sexually frustrated character, who hates everybody around because of his handicap; the Elephant is no longer a symbol of religion and intelligence, but a gluttony and love for power, as he is ready to betray his brother in order to get the power; the weasel, a symbol of the Virgin Mary is an adulterine wife; the Crocodile, possible version of the Leviathan in the medieval symbolic system becomes a rational character, capable of patience and good feelings; the Unicorn himself is no longer the symbol of Jesus Christ and of His great sacrifice (*spiritalis unicornis*), but a victim of his enemy's hate, situation that turns him into an intriguing person who rejects the possibility of purifying through self-sacrifice. All these dissolutions of acknowledged Christian symbols are realised in a subtle manner, so that the reader must invest a very sharp attention in order to notice this proceeding. Yet, its frequency is too big, so that we could consider it a random narrative effect or an accident. It is clear that Dimitrie Cantemir uses by design an iconoclastic perspective on the zoomorphic Christian symbols, which still populated at the time the East European imaginary. Therefore, we are obliged to ask which the reason of such a strategy is. Why does Cantemir use such distortions of the traditional zoomorphic symbols that sent to most important values of Christianity? Is it only a pure iconoclast spirit, a rationalistic attitude that spurns the religious knowledge? This is the most common and easy answer, but also the most superficial one. Yet, the author's writings that came later prove that he did not pass a religious crisis; he remains an Orthodox, even if sometimes a ludic one.

5. Conclusions

Hence, I risk giving a more subtle answer: Cantemir changes the coordinates of the real world transforming it into a fictional universe. It is a world that lacks any ethic criteria, any spiritual concern, a corrupted world, a rotten one; its principles are cruelty, inconstancy, the pleasure of serving the evil; shortly, it is an up-down world, with no classic value available. The very few positive characters do not succeed in counterbalancing this impression of Sodom and Gomorra. The world of birds and animals depicted in the *Hieroglyphic History* deserves a punishment by all means. But not a punishment achieved through the plot or through the fictional events; it is, let us call it so, a *meta-fictional penalty*. It is a revenge of the author himself against some fictional spectres of his real enemies. Should his characters respect the traditional symbolic system, as it was fixed in the collective memory through the Christian

bestiary, they would have been placed into a divine design, they would respect the order imposed by God; if the zoomorphic masks were designed according to the *Physiologos*, it would mean that the odious characters respect the harmony of the holy world as depicted in the Christian books of moral allegory and in the divine bestiary. As the characters are far from this divine concord, the symbols, when attached to their figures, suffer considerable deformations; the zoomorphic symbols give birth, in this way, to real anamorphoses, the effect being a grotesque and monstrous vision.

It is interesting to notice that Cantemir understands the situation explicitly in this way: for him, the social order, along with the natural order, is the result of a divine decision. The fact that the Raven, a bird that comes from the second category, occupies, by hazard, the highest position, being the king of the birds' country, is a break of the normal order, as Ioana E. Petrescu notices [7]. The fact that a grotesque hybrid as the Struthocamila (Ostrich-Camel) becomes the king of the quadrupeds is also perceived by the author as an anomaly with cosmic reverberations. Passing by the limits of their role as the divine order established, these characters disturb even the equilibrium of the world, as it is described in the religious books. And the Christian bestiary was a source of this divine design of the world. So, betraying their symbolic tradition, the zoomorphic masks from the *Hieroglyphic History* place themselves out of the celestial harmony. This is the way the author takes revenge upon some situation that frustrated him in the real world: he banishes his characters from the divine version of the spiritual world. Yet, this is not the sign of a scepticism concerning the legitimacy of the religious symbols and their message; it is not the sign of a lack of faith in the spiritual reality of the Christian values that the zoomorphic symbols transmit; it is the way the author chooses to show his critical attitude towards the upside down political world he depicts in his allegory. Briefly, his attitude is not a rationalist one, but the one of a person who regards his system of values being demolished by the mean action of some negative characters (and of their real models). This is why he refuses their access in the moralizing bestiary, which is the mirror of the divine perfection.

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