

## ELEMENTS OF SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN THE LITERARY WORKS OF VIRGIL GHEORGHIU\*

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**ABSTRACT.** IN THIS STUDY, THE AUTHORS ANALYSE THE IMPORTANT ELEMENTS OF SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN THE LITERARY WORKS OF THE WRITER VIRGIL GHEORGHIU (1916-1992). ON THE BASIS OF THE FIERCE EXPERIENCES HE UNDERWENT IN DIFFERENT EPOCHS AND UNDER VARIOUS FORMS OF DICTATORSHIP, THE WRITER TRANSFERRED MANY ELEMENTS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY INTO HIS NOVELS AND POEMS. AMONGST THESE ELEMENTS, SOME BELONG TO SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY; THEIR IMPORTANCE RESIDES BOTH IN THEIR STYLISTIC VALUE AND IN THE WAY THEY DEPICT CERTAIN ASPECTS OF HIS INNER FRAME OF MIND. THE AUTHORS SELECT ASPECTS RELATED TO THIS LITERARY AND THEOLOGICAL GENRE FROM THE TOME OF POEMS CALIGRAFIE PE ZĂPADĂ (CALLIGRAPHY ON SNOW) AND FROM VARIOUS NOVELS, SUCH AS THE TWENTY-FIFTH HOUR, THEY ANALYSE AND PRESENT THEM IN THIS RESEARCH PAPER, POINTING TO THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MAIN SPIRITUAL TRIBULATIONS OF THE ROMANIAN WRITER WHO EMIGRATED TO FRANCE AND WAS THEN ORDAINED PRIEST OF THE ROMANIAN COMMUNITY IN PARIS. MOREOVER, RESORTING TO SOME OF HIS WORKS' REVIEWS, THE AUTHORS TRY TO SEE HOW MUCH OF HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY IS REVIVED IN HIS WORKS. THIS RESEARCH, A FIRST IN THE ROMANIAN SPACE, SETS OFF TO FILL A GAP IN THIS FIELD AND BRING THE PERSONALITY OF THIS ROMANIAN WRITER BACK IN THE LIMELIGHT.

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**KEY WORDS:** PRAYER, EXILE, DICTATORSHIP, SADNESS, GOD.

Despite his popularity during his lifetime and afterwards, the personality and literary compositions of Virgil Gheorghiu (1916-1992) are insufficiently known in today's cultural milieu of Romania<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Some of the most important works dedicated to the author are: Amaury d' Esneval, *Gheorghiu*, (Pardes, Puiseaux, 2003); Constantin Cubleşan, *Escale în croazieră. Constantin Virgil Gheorghiu* (Cluj-Napoca, Grinta Press, 2011); Mirela Drăgoi, *Constantin Virgil Gheorghiu: între lume și text*, (Galați, Galați University Press, 2009); Fănuș Băileșteanu, *Nihil Sine Deo sau Cruciada literară a ecumenistului Constantin Virgil Gheorghiu*, (Craiova, Autograf MIM Press, 2005); Florea Firan, Constantin M. Popa, *Literatura diasporei*, (Craiova, Poesis Press, 1994).

However, his writings, some in French<sup>4</sup>, others in Romanian<sup>5</sup>, if analysed and reviewed<sup>6</sup>, can be the topic of some interesting research concerning autobiography, communism, dictatorship or others of the like.

Autobiography constitutes one of the means of research which could bring about new information. Having written his own memoirs, Gheorghiu is also mentioned in those of other authors, such as Monica Lovinescu<sup>7</sup>, Marin Preda<sup>8</sup>, Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran or others, seldom being depicted in a flattering way. Notwithstanding, his literary compositions often include aspects of autobiography. Thus, both *The twenty-fifth hour* and its sequel, *Pourquoi m'a-t-on appelé Virgil? (Why am I called Virgil?)*, as well as his other works touch upon his past, his state of mind when writing a tome or his spiritual undergoing. Therefore, as Constantin Cubleșan observes, "Virgil Gheorghiu's literary work falls constantly under the sign of autobiography"<sup>9</sup>.

Unlike literary autobiography, originating in ancient philosophical literature – in Platonism<sup>10</sup> –, spiritual autobiography has a series of peculiarities<sup>11</sup>. The authors of spiritual autobiography depict their states of inner tension, their itinerary towards God; they describe certain frames of mind and try to examine their spiritual self through writing. Having been defined starting with the confessions of Saint Augustine, this genre was very well received especially in the Western and Protestant space, through the works of mystics such as Teresa of Ávila<sup>12</sup>, William Perkins<sup>13</sup> or Dag Hammarskjöld<sup>14</sup>, and less in the Orthodox space. Nonetheless, the latter also approached it,

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<sup>4</sup> Some of his most important works published in France are: Constantin Virgil-Gheorghiu, *Christ au Liban. De Moïse au Palestiniens*, (Paris, Librairie Plon, 1979); Idem, *De la vingt-cinquième heure à l'heure éternelle*, (Paris, Librairie Plon, 1965); Idem, *Dieu ne recoit que le dimanche*, (Paris, Editions du Rocher, 1990); Idem, *La Condottiera*, (Paris, Librairie Plon, 1967); Idem, *La cravache*, (Paris, Librairie Plon, 1960); Idem, *La seconde chance*, translated by Livia Lamoure, (Paris, Librairie Plon, 1952); Idem, *La tunique de peau*, (Paris, Librairie Plon, 1967); Idem, *La vingt-cinquième heure*, translated by Monique Saint-Come, (Paris, Librairie Plon, 1949); Idem, *Les immortels d'Agapia*, (Paris, Librairie Plon, 1964); Idem, *Les médiums de miracles*, translated by Livia Lamoure, (Paris, Plon, 1958).

<sup>5</sup> See for example: Idem, *Ard malurile Nistrului*, (București, Editura Gea, 1993); Idem, *Caligrafie pe zăpadă (Operele premiate ale scriitorilor tineri români)*, (Bucharest, The Foundation for Literature and Art „King Carol the second”, 1940).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Carl Isabel Lundberg „Review – The twenty-fifth hour”, in *Manas*, vol. 3, No. 31, 1950, 5-7; Florin Manolescu, *Enciclopedia exilului literar românesc 1945-1989*, (Bucharest, Compania Press, 2003); Marinela Doina Dorobanțu, Kretz Erwin, "Exile and Interculturalism – The Case of Five French Writers of Romanian Origin", in *Studii de știință și cultură*, vol. VII, nr. 3, 2011, 111-117.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Monica Lovinescu, *Jurnal*, second edition, (Bucharest, Humanitas Press, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Marin Preda, *Viața ca o pradă*, (Bucharest, Curtea Veche Publishing House, 2010), 265-266.

<sup>9</sup> Constantin Cubleșan, *Escale în croazieră. Constantin Virgil Gheorghiu*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Ioan Coman, „Autobiografia în literatura patristică”, in *Studii Teologice*, Second series, XXVI (1975), no. 9-10, 654. Cf. Cristian Bejan, „Filosofia ca preocupare de sine în opera lui Marcus Aurelius”, in *Marcus Aurelius, Gânduri către sine însuși*, translated by Cristian Bejan, (Bucharest, Humanitas Press, 2013), 5-58; Philippe Lejeune, *Pactul autobiografic*, translated by Irina Margareta Nistor, (Bucharest Univers Press, Bucharest, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Pantelis Kalaitzidis, *Ortodoxie și modernitate. O introduce*, translated by Florin-Cătălin Ghiț, (Cluj-Napoca, Eikon Publishing House, 2010), 87-91; David Martin, "Rescripting Spiritual Autobiography", in *Exchange*, vol. 35, Issue 1, 2006, 93.

<sup>12</sup> Saint Teresa of Avila, *Castelul interior*, translated by Christian Tămaș, (Iassy, Ars Longa Press, 1995); Idem, *Cartea vieții mele*, translated by Christian Tămaș, (Iassy, European Institute Press, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiographies in Early Modern England*, (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2005), 98-101. Cf. W. B. Patterson, *William Perkins and the Making of a Protestant England*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2014); Michelle Marchetti Coughlin, *The life and Writings of Mehatael Chandler Coit*, (Massachusetts, University of Massachusetts Press, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Bernhard Erling, *A Reader's Guide to Dag Hammarskjöld's Waymarks*, (Minnesota, St. Peter, 2010); Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings*, (London, Faber and Faber, 1972).

creations such as the writings of Saint John of Kronstadt<sup>15</sup> and those of Saint Silouan the Athonite<sup>16</sup> being representative.

However, the works of Virgil Gheorghiu are not entirely dedicated to spiritual autobiography. Their peculiarity resides precisely in the fact that while being valuable, well written literary creations, they include elements of this genre. The aspects regarding the author's inner universe are presented in different ways. Thus, for instance, in the poems of his youth, he describes how unworthy he feels of the graces bestowed by God upon him and, like Peter during the wonderful fishing, asks Him to take them away. In the tome awarded in 1940 by the "King Carol" Foundation, there are two such poems, called *Rugăciune (Prayer)*, both transpierced by a strong mystical tension. In what follows, we shall quote the first of them:

"I am unworthy to bear the print / Of the tinselled shoe of the world, / Unworthy to have my verse thrive like rye. / I beg Thee, Lord, stop filling my ink cup with stars. / Take back the coats of arms made of acorn, gold and clover / Hidden under my waistcoat! / And the snow falling off my hands, / The ungrafted apricot trees and the tears in flame: white loaves of bread! / My forehead is stained with loneliness and hemlock. / Lord, take back the lips of the young woman who's kissing me... / Take back the star that I wear, my dandelion nib: / I am unworthy to have morning stars fall upon my paper!"<sup>17</sup>

Towards the end of the booklet, the second prayer, which can also be considered a spiritual autobiography, renders the turmoil of his lyrical self, which fails to fully understand the way in which God makes Himself felt in his soul and is unable to interact with Him. Even more, the states of tension He creates make him suffer, which is why he asks God to stop causing him pain:

"Who art Thou to cry upon my cheek with burning tears? / In vain was my search of Thy name amongst grass, people and words. / Yet, I fell Thee weakening my flesh, tipping over my ink cup / And Thou grieving next to me, like rye falling unto the ground. / Why criest Thou ceaselessly unto my forehead, without words, without a name? / Why, at night, threadst Thou upon my chest with stone feet? Tell me: / Is there someone from another world hidden in Thy tears? / Who sent Thee to tear apart my verse, to dampen it in blood? / I beg Thee, take away from me Thy ceaseless blizzard of embers, moans and hemlocks. / Behold, I wear my soul on my lips: take it like a song and go away, if so Thou wishst."<sup>18</sup>

*The twenty-fifth hour* also comprises excerpts relevant for this topic. The advice priest Traian Korugă gives to Johann Moritz before dying includes diagnoses of the society in which he lives, but also his predictions regarding the end of the world; we believe these fragments also present the author's inner states of mind and thoughts, thus being elements of spiritual autobiography:

"The meaning of life is absolutely individual and intimate. Today's society has long abandoned these truths and is heading, full speed and desperately, towards other paths. Tears of slaves have replaced the water in the river beds of the Rhine, the Danube and the Volga; these

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<sup>15</sup> Saint John of Kronstadt, *Viața mea în Hristos*, translated by Dumitru Dura, second edition, (Sibiu, „Oastea Domnului” Press, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> Saint Silouane the Athonite, *Între iadul deznădejdiei și iadul smereniei – însemnări duhovnicești*, translated by Ioan Ică jr. (Alba-Iulia, Deisis Press, 1994); Idem, *Ecrits Spirituels – extraits*, translated by L. A. Lassus, (Begrolles en Mauges, Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1976).

<sup>17</sup> Constantin Virgil Gheorghiu, *Caligrafie pe zăpadă*, 10.

<sup>18</sup> Gheorghiu, *Caligrafie pe zăpadă*, 31.

tears will fill up the river beds of all the rivers in Europe and in the world, until the seas and oceans will be brimming with the bitter tears of people enslaved by technique, the state, bureaucracy and capital. Eventually, God will have mercy and save man just as He did so many times before. Meanwhile, like Noah's Ark sailed the surface of the water, so will people who kept their humanity. They will be saved. And, through them, like in the past, humanity will continue to exist."<sup>19</sup>

The prayer of the same character who, at one point is subject to an unbearable exhaustion, which makes his wish his death and ask God to put an end to his life, shows the emotions that, doubtlessly, the author himself felt in the camps where he was held prisoner:

"Everything seems to be under a spell and my mind fails to understand any more. Therefore, I wish to die! Lord, please help me die! This hour is too harsh for me. This hour belongs to life and it cannot be experienced by flesh and blood: it is the twenty-fifth hour, too late for redemption, for life and for death! Too late for everything! Lord, turn me into stone, but do not leave me here, alone! If You leave me, I will not even be able to die! Behold, my flesh and blood are dead, yet I carry on living! The world has died, and is yet alive! And we are neither ghosts, nor humans..."<sup>20</sup>

Whilst assuming the role of a manifesto against any form of dictatorship<sup>21</sup>, *The twenty-fifth hour* is, however, a book in which the author takes a stand against certain types of lifestyle, by resorting to his own experience, which brings elements of spiritual autobiography to it. Such elements can be found in the following works as well: *De la vingt-cinquieme heure à l'heure eternelle*<sup>22</sup> (*From the twenty-fifth hour to the eternal hour*), *La condotiera*<sup>23</sup> (*The condotierre*), *La cravache*<sup>24</sup> (*The horsewhip*) and other novels of his. This makes Virgil Gheorghiu – the future priest of a part of the Romanian diaspora in Paris – a remarkable representative of writers whose works comprise elements of spiritual autobiography as well.

<sup>19</sup> Constantin Virgil Gheorghiu, *Ora 25*, translated by Elisabeta Lăsconi, (Bucharest, Grammar, 2004), 223.

<sup>20</sup> Gheorghiu, *Ora 25*, 210.

<sup>21</sup> Gabriel Marcel, „Preface”, in Virgil Gheorghiu, *La vingt-cinquieme heure*, translated by Monique Saint-Come, (Paris, Librairie Plon, 1949), I-IX.

<sup>22</sup> See: Constantin-Virgil Gheorghiu, *Tatăl meu, preotul care s-a urcat la cer- amintiri dintr-o copilărie teologică*, translated by Maria-Cornelia Ică, (Sibiu, Deisis Press, Sibiu, 2003). Cf. Ioan Ică jr., „Prefață”, in Constantin Virgil Gheorghiu, *Tatăl meu, preotul care s-a urcat la cer. Amintiri dintr-o copilărie teologică*, trad. Maria-Cornelia Ică jr., (Sibiu, Deisis Press, 1998), 5-7.

<sup>23</sup> This work was also translated in Romanian Language. See: Idem, *Condotiera*, translated by Georgiana Matei, (Cluj-Napoca, Renașterea Publishing House, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> See: Idem, *La cravache*.

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