

THE SEARCH FOR GOD IN THE MEDIEVAL NOVEL “LAUR”

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Abstract: By offering the consumers of literature a “non-historical novel”, as the writer himself mentioned on the title page, Evgheni Vodolazkin delicately manages to take his reader to a world which is outside the laws of time, although the action is placed in the Middle Ages. As we have mentioned in the review of the book, it is captivating, charming, mesmerizingly beautiful – these would be the essence of this creation. In a nutshell, we consider that Vodolazkin’s words about his own novel invite to meditation, offering a complex perspective: “There are things about which one may speak more easily in the context of old Russia. About God, for example. In my humble opinion, the connections with Him were more direct a long time ago. Furthermore, they simply existed. Now, the nature of these connections represents the preoccupation of very few people, and this leaves us in anxiety. Have we found out, from the Middle Ages onwards, a completely new thing that has allowed us to relax?”¹

Keywords: medieval novel, Christian Orthodox, God, repentance, healing power, metanoia

There are a few books on this Earth who are written with soul, heart and mind and *Laur* is one of them, together with *The Dead Are Coming Back Home*. Being placed in the 15th century, in Russia, with an intrigue that manages to surpass time and space, *Laur* is the Bildungsroman of Arseni, who is a healer, a fool-for-Christ, a pilgrim and a monk, he passes from one phase to another during the entire book which contains four individualized chapters which are suggestively called “The Book of Knowledge”, “The Book of Giving Up”, “The Book of the Road” and “The Book of Tranquility”².

Bases on the ideas that “nothing happens haphazardly” and *metanoia*, just like in the book “The Dead Are Coming Back Home”³ by Cornel Constantin Ciomâzga, the novel has a deeply philosophical, religious and

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¹ <http://www.humanitas.ro/humanitas-fiction/laur>, Last seen on November 22nd, 2016.

² Evgheni Vodolazkin, *Laur, A nonhistorical novel*, Translation from Russian and notes by Adriana Liciu, “Humanitas Fiction” Publishing House, Bucharest, 2014, page 325, my translation.

³ Cornel Constantin Ciomâzga, *Se întorc morții acasă [The Dead Are Coming Back Home]*, “Cartea actuală 3 C” Publishing House, Bucharest, 2014.

spiritual meaning, underlined by the fragment: “In this victory over time, he saw the confirmation of the fact that nothing of what happens in the world is haphazard. People crash on each other (Ambrogio thought), fly to each other, like atoms”⁴; for *metanoia*, it is representative the following: “He is a Greek-Russian believer and he asks you to change your thoughts, in other words – to repent, because in Greek, repentance is called *metanoia*, which means exactly the change of thoughts”⁵. Moreover, in *Laur* and *The Dead Are Coming Back Home*, there is also a specific scene during which one of the male characters has a fish bone in his throat, menacing to end his life: “The bone got stuck in the throat in three points. It neither goes further down, nor up. It went too deep for it to be reached with one’s fingers. Mother Marfa hits her husband in the back, but the bone can’t be moved”⁶. In Cornel Constantin Ciomâzică’s novel, the corresponding fragment is the following: “Everything started from some fish brought by one of his nephews. His wife prepared a saramura⁷ for him. The polenta – burning hot, the appetite – big, the eyesight – a little bit weakened, one fishbone went down his throat and...got stuck in it, of course. Coughing, lack of air, water-water, fists near the backhead, hâc-hâc and he went down like a sack of spuds. Before his wife went and brought someone or asked for an ambulance to come, the woman being out of her bearings, the old man who was also suffering from a heart disease, started to turn cold.

Agitation, screaming, neighbours, telephones, slapping of the man’s cheeks, “spread some water on his face”, “give him some vinegar”, “loosen up his buttons near the throat”, “push hard on his chest”, “mouth to mouth resuscitation”, “missing breathing!”, “oh, my God, quickly light a candle!”, “this poor man has just kicked the bucket”⁸.

The red thread which unites these four chapters of *Laur* is the spiritual transformation of Arseni, it is his connection with God which inspired us to search for the deeper meaning of his journey towards the afterlife, which simply defies normal laws of time and space. In this respect, in the text, there is a plastic bottle which appears in the description of a forest in spring, in the Middle Ages. This anachronism which was created on purpose is explained by the author in the following way: “It appears there because I wanted to suggest that there is no time. And this is the essential idea of the novel: there is eternity, but no time. The main means of expressing this thing is language”⁹. The corresponding fragment in the book is this: “Under the snow, one could have a glimpse at the untidiness of the forest – leaves from the past year, rags which had lost their colour and faded plastic bottles. In the glades open to sun, grass

⁴ Idem 2, page 172, my translation.

⁵ Idem 2, page 225, my translation.

⁶ Idem 2, page 161, my translation.

⁷ A type of dish which is fish-based, similar to a salted soup which may also have garlic, vinegar, used as garnish in some situations.

⁸ Idem 3, page 12, my translation.

⁹ Idem 2, cover page, my translation.

had already appeared, but in the thickets, snow was still thick. And it was cold there"¹⁰.

With powerful and vivid words, Vodolazkin manages to re-create the atmosphere of the Middle Ages, a representative example is the moment when Laur takes full responsibility for Anastasia's pregnancy, when the crowd of medieval village people is on the verge of slaughtering the future mother because she refused to declare who the father of her unborn child was and every single negative event from the community was associated with the unwed girl who was believed to have sinned with the devil. Saints adopted this behaviour, in order to save lives, they claimed they were the fathers of unmarried women who were condemned by the society. "In the Middle Ages, sensations were few, and what happened with Laur was, undoubtedly, something sensational, because it was about the fall of a faultless man.(...) When they spoke about it, many people felt sorry for Laur, noticing the fact that the height of one's flight is threatened by a fall which may be just as big as the ascension"¹¹.

As we have already mentioned, Arseni passes through some major changes that are going to become a way of living for him. In the village Rukina, where he was born, his mentor was Hristofor, his grandfather, the one who taught him everything about the healing power of faith and plants. Moreover, Hristofor is the one who also noticed the early qualities of the child who was gifted by God with the power of foreseeing: "Grandpa Hristofor looked at how the mysterious currents of the icon were flowing into Arseni's hands. Once, he wrote down the following remark; the child has a special power of focusing"¹²; "In order to strengthen not only Arseni's faith, but also his spirit, he placed him in monastery"¹³; when Arseni turned fourteen and Hristofor taught him how to cure people of plague, he started crying because he had "seen in advance" that his father would die of this illness:

"What happened to you, why are you crying?, asked Hristofor.

I see the sign of death on him, answered the boy.

Arseni continued his crying for seven days and seven nights. Hristofor kept silent, because he knew the boy was right"¹⁴.

The divine gift of foreseeing events is also given to another character in this "nonhistorical novel", as Vodolazkin said, we are now referring to Ambrozie, who predicted five events in his early childhood: the dream about his family gathering grapes before the sudden darkness and the destroying hailstorm with ice as big as a dove's egg (page 169), the war on the territory of Piedmont, started in 1494 (page 170), the discovery of America by Columbus

¹⁰ Idem 2, page 63, my translation.

¹¹ Vodolazkin, Evgheni, *Laur*, Humanitas Fiction, 2014, Bucharest, page 315, my translation.

¹² Idem 2, page 18, my translation.

¹³ Idem 2, page 20, my translation.

¹⁴ Idem 2, page 23, my translation.

in 1492 (page 170), Florence haunted by plague for two years (page 171) and the terrible flood from November 4, 1966 (page 174).

Except for the gift of foreseeing, Arseni also has the power of healing people by using words and plants, respecting the indications of Hristofor who transmitted all his knowledge to his grandson. In this respect, a powerful moment is the one during which a woman with a head tumor is cured in a miraculous way: "Believe in God and His Holy Mother and you will find help. The abbot touched her forehead with dried lips. And the tumor will regress. Go in peace and stop being upset.

Why are you crying, Arseni?

I am crying of joy"¹⁵.

Furthermore, if we analyze the entire novel, there are numerous moments when Arseni, with God's help, actually works miracles, at pages 157, 158, 160, 161, 294, to mention only a few of them. Moreover, we found fragments which remind us of Surrealism, there are undeniable connections with the world of art: when Arseni cured a woman of a terrible tooth ache, he did something almost hilarious, underlined in the fragment "He put his hand in his mouth, he pulled the wisdom tooth from the gum and handed it to the newcomers. They understood that this was the answer of the healer to their request. They took the wisdom tooth to the wife, she put it inside her mouth and the pain went away"¹⁶.

Moreover, it is essential the fact that he passes through four phases during which he changes his name, this fact can also be associated with the moment when monks leave their former earthly life and dedicate their existence to God, also changing their names, as a sign of "rebirth" in a new existence. The eloquent fragment is the following: "Laur is a good name, because the plant which is now your homonym is medicinal. Being always green, it symbolizes eternal life.

No longer do I feel the unity of my life, said Laur. I was Arseni, Ustin, Ambrozie, and now, look, I have become Laur. My life has been lived by four people who don't look alike, who have different bodies and different names. What do we have in common, the blonde child from Rukina village and I? Memory? The more I live, the more it seems that my memories are inventions. I have ceased to believe in them, and this is why they can't connect me with the one that I was in different periods. Life looks very much like a mosaic and it opens up in pieces.(...) But even in the mosaic of life, there is what unites all its components: the aspiration towards Him. In Him, they all become one, again"¹⁷.

Regarding the change of name, Arseni became Ustin when the girl he loved died, after giving birth to their dead child, she suffered from plague. The

¹⁵ Idem 2, page 29, my translation.

¹⁶ Idem 2, page 156, my translation.

¹⁷ Idem 2, page 296, my translation.

moments when he realizes that the girl he loved was dead, unwed and with a dead child near her – their son!!! – are full of dramatism and even negation of reality: "Ustina was there, her eyes closed, and Arseni felt how life rolled outside her body. Ustina, don't go, Arseni cried from the bottom of himself, so powerfully, that the abbot Nikandru heard him from the monastery"¹⁸. It is traumatizing the idea that the two beings left this life without receiving the Holy Eucharist and Arseni takes full responsibility for this, the motif of sleep appears here as "a water of oblivion", as a negation of reality, as a sign of his depression: "Even in his sleep, he was afraid to discover that Ustina was dead. He was terrified now, in the morning: the coming of a new day without Ustina was unbearable for him. He was soaking wet with sleep until he forgot about him. Sleep was leaking through his veins and was knocking on his heart.(...) When he saw Death, Arseni's soul said: I can't bear your glory, and I can see that your beauty is not from this world. In that moment, the soul of Arseni saw the soul of Ustina. Her soul was almost transparent and this is why it was not perceivable.(...) Death was already holding Ustina's soul by the hand and was ready to take it up"¹⁹.

It is intriguing the fact that another Russian saint, this time a woman, Xenia of Sankt Petersburg, took her beloved husband's name after he died, as a sign of changing her life, as a way of maintaining his memory vivid and as a supreme sign of love, because she managed to live until the end of her life using his name. In the book "The Life, Miracles and the Akathist of Saint Xenia", it is also mentioned the moment when she changed her name, written on her grave stone: "In the name of Father and Son and the Holy Spirit. Here lies God's servant Xenia Grigorievna, the wife of Colonel Andrei Theodorovici Petrov, an imperial Kappelmaister. Widow when she was 26, pilgrim for 45 years, she lived until the age of 71. She was known under the name of Andrei Theodorovici. May all that have known her pray for her soul's salvation"²⁰. Furthermore, a piece of explanation of Saint Xenia's behaviour can also be connected to Arseni's change of name into Ustina, not to mention also the fact that we have found more than sixty references to Ustina, during which Arseni "talks" to her, it is a unidirectional dialogue as a sign of his perpetual love for her, in everything he does. Regarding Sain Xenia, it has been written: "Towards the end of her life, she went back to Petersburg dressed in an old uniform of her husband, and from that moment on, she refused to answer when called Xenia Grigorievna, she replaced this name with her husband's, Andrei Theodorovici. Maybe in her deep devotion towards her husband, she believed she could take over the burden of his sins and

¹⁸ Idem 2, page 74, my translation.

¹⁹ Idem 2, page 75, my translation.

²⁰ *The Life, Miracles and the Akathist of the Saint Xenia, Our Mother of Sankt Petersburg*, Translation from English: Maria Paraschiv, Anestis Publishing House, s.a., s.l., page 9, my translation.

unfortunate death that caught him totally unprepared. Full of sorrow and repentance for her own sins and her husband's, she left her house, wandering around the lonely streets of Petersburg, known as Storona²¹ Petersburg²².

In his search towards forgiveness for his own sins, Ustina's and the lost child, Arseni dedicates his entire existence to healing people. He becomes one of the so called "fools-for-God". In the Athonite Paterikon, it is explained this term which may be unknown by the people who are not Christian Orthodox: "Those who were <fools-for-Christ> were wise people for God and crazy ones from the point of view of the world. They were in fact (though it was a mystery) saints, but for the world, they seemed abnormal. With their holy weird things and with their theatrical behaviour, they managed to mock "the ugliness" of the decaying human nature and especially the cursed pride of people, which is the source of all evils. The method of "fools-for-Christ" puts an end to selfish love and attacks human vanity. Many are the "fools-for-Christ" that lived in the Holy Mountain and have been left unknown to us, but God knew them. Hidden from the world, they were seen by the angels"²³.

In this respect, Arseni is a fool-for-God, because he does things which seem unexplainable to rational human beings, but totally justified in the eyes of God: "Arseni threw mud balls in a few respected inhabitants from Zapskovie. At their back, he could clearly distinguish big and small devils. The inhabitants are not satisfied.

The only consolation is that the devils are even less satisfied.

Sometimes, Arseni threw stones in the doors of churches. There is also another place where a sufficient number of devils gather. They do not dare to go inside and they all gather at the entrance"²⁴.

If we do focus on the religious and psychological meanings of suffering, because many of the inhabitants of the visited places are cured by Arseni, we launch the following question: what would the purpose of physical and mental suffering be? In the book *Suffering and Spiritual Growth*, Priest Liviu Petcu, Academic Assistant, PhD, underlines the words of a hermit who said: "If you pay your debts in this life, you can find salvation. But, if you are hit in the head several times, you will get even something more than this."²⁵ In some cases, even if the people who deal with suffering are seen by the others as innocent and having too cruel a destiny, we should not let ourselves

²¹ Meaning "the outskirts of the city".

²² Idem 12, page 11, my translation.

²³ <http://www.pateric.ro/capitolul-xxxix-despre-fericita-nebunie-pentru-ristos-care-naste-deplina-smerenie-si-care-aduce-duh-dumnezeiesc-si-har-ceresc/>, Chapter XXXIX – About the happy madness for Christ, which gives birth to full piety and brings God's Holy Spirit and Divine Gift, page last seen on November 22, 2016, my translation.

²⁴ Evgheni Vodolazkin, *Laur, A nonhistorical novel*, Translation from Russian and notes by Adriana Liciu, "Humanitas Fiction" Publishing House, Bucharest, 2014, page 157, my translation.

²⁵ Liviu Petcu, *Suferința și creșterea spirituală [Suffering and Spiritual Growth]*, The Publishing House of the Academic Foundation AXIS, Iași, 2012, page 30, my translation.

be trapped by human interpretations. In this respect, it is mentioned: "God allows the innocent to suffer in order to give a new chance to the ones who haven't repented, so that they can be brought back to the path of contrition, after having seen the suffering of the ones without guile, thus becoming like the good thief who was put on the cross on Christ's right side"²⁶.

Moreover, in *The Athonite Paterikon*, there is a clear reference to the way we should live, there is a clear exhortation in the quotation: "If we ask for pieces of explanation regarding what happens to us, we can lose everything. We lose the tranquility of our mind and the reward"²⁷. In order to bring a broader perspective on the topic, Priest Liviu Petcu brings the following argument: "In most cases, the ones that people consider accomplished (from a spiritual perspective - perfect, ideal)²⁸ still have, in the eyes of the Creator, something imperfect or not complete"²⁹. < In the same way – writes Saint Gregory the Great – not knowing, we often look at the sculpted statues which are still not finished, already praising them as if they were perfect, but the maestro still examines them and still polishes them; though he has heard the praising words, he keeps on retouching, making everything right>"³⁰.

Reflecting on the healing power of the fools-for-Christ, we have been intrigued by the book *The Lausiatic History* where there is a fragment which is, in our humble opinion, connected to Vodolazkin's Arseny and his gift of healing, given by God to the rightful ones who also show endurance in suffering: "Inside this book (*The Lausiatic History*), we are taught a great lesson of patience in suffering. We also learn from it not to be amazed nor bewildered when we see the rightful one in sufferance"³¹. < In the Mountain of Nitria, a man called Veniamin has lived for eighty years, willingly living in hard conditions. He received God's mercy by the power of healing. Every person who had his hand put on him/her or who received blessed oil after giving him/her the blessing, was delivered from any illness. This man, embellished with such a charisma, got sick of hydropsy eight months before he died and his body became so swollen, that he seemed to be another kind of Job. (...) Because we couldn't look at his terrible sufferance, we changed the direction of our sight. Then, the happy Veniamin told us: "Pray, my sons, so that my inner human being doesn't become ill of hydropsy">"³².

²⁶ Idem 4, page 31, my translation.

²⁷ Ioannikios Kotsonis, *The Athonite Paterikon*, Translation by Anca Dobrin and Maria Ciobanu, "Bunavestire" Publishing House, Bacău, 2000, pages 122-123, my translation.

²⁸ What is placed in brackets is my commentary, in order to better understand the term "accomplished".

²⁹ Liviu Petcu, op.cit., page 32, my translation.

³⁰ Saint Gregory the Great, *Dialoguri despre moarte [Dialogues about Death]*, translation by George Bogdan Țăra, Amarcord Publishing House, Timișoara, 1998, page 52, my translation.

³¹ Liviu Petcu, op.cit., page 33, my translation.

³² Paladie, *Istoria lausiacă [The Lausiatic History]*, translation, introduction and notes by Priest Dumitru Stăniloae, PhD Professor, IBMBOR Publishing House, Buchares, 1993, p.30-31.

Furthermore, if we search for the deeper meaning of suffering, we can find it in the words of Saint John Chrysostom: “You will ask: <How has God allowed this to happen? >. In order to place on the head of the right one more crowns and to punish the devil more”³³.

If we connect the spiritual state of mind of Vodolazkin’s character Arseni with the words of Saint John Chrysostom regarding the eight reasons for the saints’ suffering, we discover that the literary character has all the attributes of a real saint, after he repents for his youth deed when he lived with Ustina, being unweid in front of God: “I can say that eight are the reasons for the saints’ suffering. Because of this, listen to all of them carefully, knowing that no forgiveness or relief will come to us if we are outraged by fleeting events, whose causes are multiple, still, we should not be outraged by any of them.

Consequently, *the first reason* is to prevent the situation in which the great virtues and amazing things made by the saints cause them pride.

The second is to prevent the world from worshipping them more than they should as people and to prevent people from looking at them as if they were gods, not simple mortals.

The third, in order to make God’s power shine more, using it to win and spread faith in His name to all people who pass through misfortunes and who are persecuted from all sides.

The fourth, because the patience of saints itself appears more glowingly, showing people that they do not serve God because they have an interest, but because they have for Him pure love, because, in the middle of all misfortunes, they are always devoted to Him.

The fifth, in order to make us think about the resurrection of the dead, because when a rightful person, full of merits, leaves this life after having been suffered countless hardships, the human being thinks about the future judgment without one’s own will, and one tells oneself: if people never leave the ones who work for them without payment, it is self-understood that God will never forget to repay those who ended their life while suffering and working for Him. But, if it is not possible to deprive them of their reward, surely, by not receiving it in this world, they will receive it in the afterlife.

The sixth, because those who suffer misfortunes need to be encouraged and comforted by seeing that the most amazing and holy people have suffered the same or even worse.

The seventh, because when we are given the piece of advice to look at the virtue of the rightful ones, and when we are told: imitate the happy Peter, imitate de happy Paul, the greatness of their deeds should not make us believe

³³ Saint John Chrysostom, in the volume *Problemele vieții [The Problems of Life]*, translation by Cristian Spătăreanu and Daniela Filioreanu, „Cartea Ortodoxă” Publishing House, Galați, s.a., p.268-269, my translation.

that they had a different nature from ours or that it may be impossible for us to imitate such big models.

The eighth, finally, in order to show you what happiness and misery truly consist of, who should be considered a happy or a miserable person”³⁴.

In a nutshell, the search for God in this novel is marked by the motif of the fool-for-God, the healing power of faith, words and plants, the change of name corresponding to several phases of spiritual development. This spiritual dimension is enhanced by the connections which we have found with Andrei Rublev, Tarkovsky’s movies and *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco. We do believe that this novel is a powerful Russian writing, representing an invitation for the readers to introspection, in search for higher values for one’s soul.

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