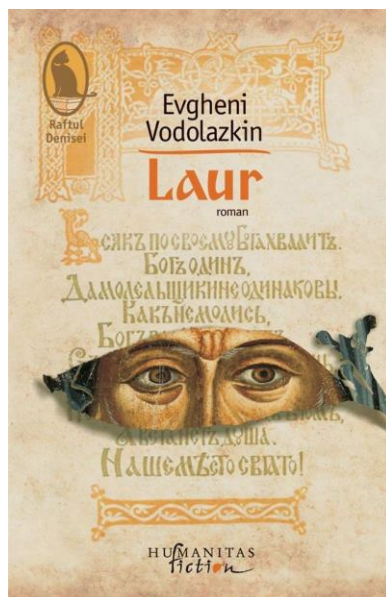


## A Powerful Russian Novel: *Laur*, Evgheni Vodolazkin

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Evgheni Vodolazkin, *Laur*, Roman neistoric, / *Laur*, A nonhistorical novel, translation from Russian and notes by Adriana Liciu, Humanitas Fiction Publishing House, Bucharest, 2014, 328 pages.



Being considered a masterpiece of contemporary Russian literature, the novel *Laur* by Evgheni Vodolazkin was published in Romanian by “Humanitas Fiction” in 2014, the Russian version appeared in 2012. The novel received the most important Russian literary award in 2013 – The Prize “Bolșaia Kniga” and the Prize “Iasnaia Poliana” (Lev Tolstoy) in the same year, when it was also nominated on the short list of “Nationalnii Bestseller” and “Russkii Buker”. It has been translated in more than twenty languages, the reactions of the international public being positive.

The book reminds us of Andrei Rublev, of Tarkovsky’s movies and of *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco, the action is set in the 15th century, the main character passes through several changes in life, being a healer, a fool-for-Christ, a pilgrim and a monk. If we have a look at the structure of the book, there are four chapters, each of them corresponding to the phases through which Arseni passes during his existence, also changing his name: “The Book of Knowledge”, “The Book of Giving Up”, “The Book of the Way”, “The Book of Tranquility”<sup>1</sup>.

The atmosphere of the Middle Ages is brought to life through vivid images, such as 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 was and every single negative event from the community was associated with the unwed girl who was believed to have sinned with the

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<sup>1</sup> We have translated the names of the chapters into English.

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”<sup>2</sup>.

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”<sup>3</sup>.

As far as the writing style is concerned, we believe that the essence is represented by a refined simplicity, normally passing from what is real to fantastic, from what is earthly to saint things, the humour is subtle and delicately spread in the narrative thread. Furthermore, there is a charming sensitivity about Vodolazkin; moreover, one can feel his free spirit in his intelligent religiosity, the story in itself transmits a large amount of emotion, its beauty and depth simply change the reader’s perception at multiple levels, it is the type of writing which primarily addresses one’s soul.

What is simply amazing is the transformation of Arseni into “Ustin” during the entire novel. By his behaviour, by curing people, by living in a way which is considered by him appropriate in order to repent from his youth deed – the fact that he ignored all Christian laws when he lived in fornication with a girl, Ustina, who died while giving birth to a dead child – the healer Arseni changes his name into “Ustin” in order to worship the memory of his beloved one, in order to permanently “talk” to her spirit during the entire novel; in this respect, we have found approximately sixty situations in which Arseni seems to take comfort in having her soul around him and in discussing different aspects of his life. He even reaches that point when he says “ <But I took her earthly life>. The abbot looked at him with serenity. <Then, give her your life.> <But, can I really live in her place?> < If you understand this seriously - yes, you can. Love made you be one with Ustina, this means that a part of her is still here. She is you.>”<sup>4</sup>

This mesmerizing book has a few motifs which are recurrent and are worth mentioning, creating the narrative skeleton of the novel: the healing power of faith, the power of words, the metaphor of life seen as flight,

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<sup>2</sup> Vodolaskin, Evgheni, *Laur*, Humanitas Fiction, 2014, Bucharest, page 315, my translation.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, page 156, my translation.

<sup>4</sup> Vodolaskin, Evgheni, *Laur*, Humanitas Fiction, 2014, Bucharest, pages 84-85, my translation.

ascension, metanoia, the curing of people - true miracles in most cases, the ability of seeing the future – specific to people chosen by God, people who have reached a specific spiritual level, miracles such as the bread which simply never ended, until Laur reached death and the walking on water, the motif of Pygmalion and Galatea, identified in Arseni and Ustina, the power of one's prayer both inside the community and alone. As far as the themes of this novel are concerned, we do mention here death and belief in the afterlife, the purpose of life, people and God.

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. Captivating, charming, mesmerizingly beautiful – these would be the essence of this book. 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?”.