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Ștefan Augustin Doinaș - Between Faith and Reason or outline for a *Poiesis* of the Psalms¹

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Abstract

Whenever it comes to a great author, a curiosity aiming beyond the text itself arises within the reader, pertaining to what it was called the *poiesis* of the work. Unlike the poetics, dealing with the text already conceived, the *poiesis* concentrates on the message production process. Therefore, a new relation rises between literature and saying about literature, between the religious poetry and the thought of it – *ante factum*, in the volume *Past Present*, and *post factum*, in the volume *Returning Home*. We may claim that the author's confessions and thoughts, within the above stipulated works, operates as a placing into abyss ("mise en abyme") for Doinaș's *Psalms* (like a *poiesis*). The motivation behind the writing of *Psalms* is triple: the religious feeling, the detention, the emulation spirit (the overcoming of the biblical pattern and the one provided by other psalms authors). Trying to reach the meaning of the world, through poetry and reflection on poetry, through *Psalms*, which not by accident, represents his last poems work, Doinaș eventually discovers that the meaning of the world fails to be revealed within the man, but outside, within God.

Keywords

Ștefan Aug. Doinaș, psalm, esthetical theory, poiesis, faith, reason

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Either of Doinaș' essays volumes issued before 1996 fails to deal with any religious issue, either of the poem volumes issued till then fails to comprise such a topic. And, nevertheless, the volume issued in 1996, *Past Present*, includes two essays bearing the titles *A Dialogue with Myself* and *Orthodoxy and Ecumenism*, where the first author's confessions/thoughts on his religious option occur. In a poetical form - *Psalms*, in 1997, shortly followed by the interview Doinaș gave to Emil Șimăndan, in 2000, on the occasion of tendering the author's prize, in Arad, an interview published in the volume *Returning Home* (2002), after Doinaș's disappearance, they announce his confession. Whenever it comes to a great author, a curiosity aiming beyond the text itself arises within the reader, pertaining to what it was called the *poiesis* of the work. Unlike the poetics, dealing with the text already conceived, the *poiesis* concentrates on the message production process, both closely related to the esthetic level, to receiving.² Therefore, a new relation rises between literature and saying about literature, between the religious poetry and the thought of it – *ante factum* (in the volume *Past Present*) and *post factum* (in the volume *Returning Home*). We may claim that the author's confessions and thoughts, within the above stipulated works, operates as a placing into abyss ("mise en abyme") for Doinaș's *Psalms* (like a *poiesis*), which, at their turn, includes their own poetics; the placing into abyss operates as a metatextual thought; it applies to the use of the text itself: "Upon limit, every self referential text represents a placing into the abyss".³

The essay *A Dialogue with Myself*, as the author put it, the ambition to define him, but not to consume him. He shows sincerity "as long as I was able to impose myself as my own confessor".⁴ The first thoughts on faith occur here. In the author's view, a superior man, endowed with reason, spends the life seeking the meaning of this world, which, at the end of an inexhaustible searching, fails to find it within the self, but outwardly. The idea of the world meaning circulates through the European culture from Antiquity to nowadays, acquiring different answers. Following Doinaș suggestion, we are going to refer to the great Russian philosopher and

² Irina Mavrodin, *Modernii, precursori ai clasicilor (Moderns, classics' predecessors)*, Dacia Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 1981, p. 10.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁴ Ștefan Aug. Doinaș, *Mai-mult-ca-prezentul (Past Present)*, Aius Publishing House, Craiova, 1996, p. 94.

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theologian, Nikolai Berdyaev, who provides us with a possible answer in relation to this meaning of the world, that man discovers within God, abandoning the meaningless of the existence, in Its absence:

“Whether God fails to exist, mystery fails to exist. And where is no mystery, then the world is unmeaning and man turns into a bidimensional being, unable to arise. If there is no God, there is no victory upon death, or eternal life; therefore everything is meaningless and absurd”.⁵

This paradoxical idea of God’s presence/absence is expressed by the double of lyrical self (the empirical self) as a rhetorical question: “You want to claim that God is the present-absent meaning of this world, present in the world by Its very absence (i.e. transcendence)?”⁶ From the paradox of deity’s absence – presence we reach to the paradox of the real man, loving God even by his reason.⁷ Otherwise, the idea of this fight between reason and faith represents the main topic of Doinaș’s *Psalms*, as the author himself relates it in the interview given to Emil Șimăndan.⁸ The “quarrel” between reason and faith is continued in the essay *Orthodoxy and Ecumenism*: “Our struggle – with the angel – translates, psychologically, into the encounter between faith and reason, between the vision of the divine mystery and the abstract effort of knowing it.”⁹

By using an inspired metaphor, Doinaș defines the faith as “the man’s divine hearing”.¹⁰ As for certain people they are given the capacity of participating, actively or contemplatively, to “the endless universe of and endlessly fascinating of sounds”¹¹, others are bestowed with the divine hearing – which is the faith – “allowing their access to the universe of metaphysical meanings of the real existence”.¹² The people deprived of faith resemble to those who, with no audition, take part to the performance of Bach or Mo-

⁵ Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Caesar*, translation, notes and postface by Ilie Gyurcsik, “Amarcord” Publishing House, Timișoara, “Symposium” collection, 1994, p. 94.

⁶ Ștefan Augustin Doinaș, *Past Present*, Aius Publishing House, Craiova, 1996, p. 94.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁸ *Întoarcerea acasă, (Returning Home). Ștefan Augustin Doinaș in a dialogue with Emil Șimăndan*, preamble by Ion Pop, „Ioan Slavici” Foundation Publishing House, Arad, 2003, p. 71.

⁹ Ștefan Aug. Doinaș, *Past Present*, p. 96

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

zart's work, with the same impassibility as for a military parade.¹³ Doinaş concludes that it is real that "the divine hearing fails to emerge only from our own endowment, but also from the divine grace, of which effusion on man is unforeseeable".¹⁴ Ascertaining that the meaning of existence resides freely of man, Doinaş claims that it is not the reason to help us find it, but the faith, determined under these coordinates:

"In my view, faith represents the ecstatic kneeling of reason, which, accepting its limitation, lies speechlessly before the encountered nothingness; a nothingness ceasing to be, for it, a desert of horror and terror, within the very moment when – and only when – the divine grace envelops it".¹⁵

In order to define the divine grace, we shall refer, once more, to the Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev who claims that this grace may occur within every man, in the time of revelation, but this does not necessarily mean that all men know to have lived such a moment: "Man possesses within the self a divine element. But the grace, provided that we shall no longer paraphrase it from a juridical perspective and we shall no longer link it to the idea of authority, is but the revelation of this divine element in man, the awake of the divine within the man".¹⁶

Undoubtedly, we reach to the point of asking ourselves how Doinaş's *Psalms* have come into being and we shall try by answering starting with the author's confessions which, in his case, we are able to do it. The author clarifies from the beginning that "the true inspiration of a religious poem fails to rely on the bookish universe, on the reading, on a certain topic of the cultural environment, but it lays within a peculiar inner strength".¹⁷ He believes that man deprived of the religious emotion is unable to deal with the religious poetry: "I could tell you that I have written religious poetry because of a spiritual, inner necessity".¹⁸ Moreover, I believe that, as Berdyaev claims, one may not build anything unless endowed with an adequate inner/spiritual structure, and from the reading, one assimilates

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 96-97.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹⁶ Nikolai Berdyaev, *Adevăr și revelație. Prolegomene la critica revelației (Truth and Revelation. Prolegomena to the Critique of Revelation)*, translation, notes and post-face by Ilie Gyurcsik, Timișoara, Editura de Vest, 1993, p. 140-141.

¹⁷ *Întorcerea acasă (Returning Home)*, p. 69.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

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but in compliance with the immanent self. This is what the Russian philosopher wrote in one of his books of spiritual conversion:

“The only thing that granted me the understanding of the book I was reading was my own immanent experience. In this case, what the book contains represents but signs of my spiritual path. Generally, I believe that otherwise one may not be able at all to understand anything of the books. From the outside, from a *non – self* to which nothing would correspond within the *self*, one may not be able to understand or discover anything”.¹⁹

It is not by accident, the last poems volume of Doinaș is *Psalms* (1997). Considering the volume, we may approach it through the author’s confessions when thinking of its genesis. Firstly, the poet claims that, in this volume, it is noticeable “the confidence in words, the direct emotion, and the direct confessions of his first youth poems, not the ballads, but the others”.²⁰ Secondly, we discover that the idea of writing the *Psalms* have come into being together with the translation in Romanian of the Bible *Psalms*, upon Paul Miron’s initiative.²¹ To this relevant milestone of his spiritual biography, another is added: the detention. “I have got out of the prison with a stronger faith than I had when I got in”.²² Doinaș relates a story while he was in detention: he occupied the same hold with the historian Zenobie Pâclișanu – who was a Greek-Catholic priest -, imprisoned for the distrust of being a spy. Every evening, at a certain hour, was telling him: “Dear Ștefan, forgive me, but now I raise my antenna!”²³ For him, “to raise his antenna” meant to start praying and saying, wordlessly, the whole Liturgy, a moment consecrated every day for an hour or an hour and a half. This particular instant represents in Doinaș’s view a relevant option for writing his *Psalms*: “Every man encountering such an example may not remain detached”.²⁴ Such a spiritual conversion, as a consequence of the detention, followed by the confession, in relation with the metamorphosis occurred within the converted person, still exists in the Romanian envi-

¹⁹ Nikolai Berdiaev, *Cunoașterea de sine. Exercițiu de autobiografie filosofică (Self-Knowledge. An Essay in Autobiography)*, translated from Russian by Inna Cristea, Humanitas Publishing House, București, p. 99.

²⁰ *Întoarcerea acasă (Returning Home)*, p. 68.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 70.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

ronment. We may not avoid thinking of the conversion to Orthodoxy of Nicolae Steinhardt – which is a spiritual conversion –, following detention, and entailing after a few years the confession as *The Happiness Diary*.²⁵ The diary includes memories, while here we have a poetical confession.

Another motivation for writing the *Psalms* may be discovered in Doinaș's view on the relation between tradition and innovation: a valuable work integrates into a series, into a tradition²⁶ it is true that to abandon the masters' shadow originality is required, which, though, as a first step, comprises the assimilation of the predecessors' lesson (the classical approach). The poet's intention was not to only imitate the Bible *Psalms*, but also to take a step further from the manner in which Tudor Arghezi and Vasile Voiculescu wrote the religious poetry.²⁷ This represented quite a difficult endeavor, considering that, in the Romanian literature, there was a rich tradition related to the psalms.²⁸ In the chapter VIII (*Psalms at the Dawn of Postmodernism*), Al. Andriescu asks himself whether Doinaș thought of following the entire Psalm Book in order to elaborate his own version.²⁹ The answer is that, unyieldingly, the intention (and the carrying out) was different, as the author himself put it, since either by number, or vision and style, Doinaș's *Psalms* fails to emulate the biblical psalms, despite the psalms subjects in the poet's work. This aspect do not encumber the poet to follow the path to the old roots and write a psalm like Dosoftei had (*Psalm C*), thus, proving, the Romanian religious literature vividness.³⁰ Also, *Psalm C* lines up with the praising psalms³¹ of the Old Testament, by using

²⁵ Considering this issue, see Dorina Popescu, *Ispita confesiunii sau Convertirea la Aurelius Augustinus și Nicolae Steinhardt (Temptation of Confession or Conversion for Aurelius Augustinn and Nicolae Steinhardt)*, preface by Dan Negrescu, Eubeea Publishing House, Timișoara, 2010, p. 63 and sq.

²⁶ Ștefan Aug. Doinaș, *Lampa lui Diogene (Diogenes' Lamp)*, Eminescu Publishing House, București, 1970, p. 206 and passim.

²⁷ *Întorcerea acasă (Returning Home)*, p. 71.

²⁸ See Al. Andriescu, *Psalmii în literatura română (Psalms in Romanian Literature)*, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University Publishing House, Iași, 2004, p. 9 and passim.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 335.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 342-343.

³¹ See *Septuagint. Psalms. Odes. Proverbs. Ecclesiast. Canticle of Canticles*, volume coordinated by Cristian Bădiliță, Francisca Băltăceanu, Monica Broșteanu, in collaboration with Father Ioan-Florin Florescu, translations by: Cristian Bădiliță, Francisca Băltăceanu, Florica Bechet, Monica Broșteanu, Ioana Costa, Marius David Cru-ceru, Cristian Gașpar, Eugen Munteanu, Ion Pătrulescu, Polirom Publishing House,

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both structural procedures and procedures related to the construction of the image.³² Doinaș himself claims, in relation with the said psalm, that it is the only one of religious inspiration that “takes the praising tone in relation with the Divinity, Bible like.”³³ The subject of the *Psalms* is outlined by the poet who makes an analogy between his psalms and Arghezi’s, which he considers as “the psalms of quarreling and bargaining with God”³⁴, while his are viewed as an expression of an issue – the struggle between faith and reason.³⁵

This type of poetry, written only “ex immo pectore”, arises from a change and entails a metamorphosis of the psalmist, asking himself about his relation to the divinity, revealing both his place in regard to the *high above world* and the place of the *high above world* and himself. “I beg, in all humbleness:/ bestow, my God, the faith!”, the psalmist vows in *Psalms LXXXVIII*³⁶, preserving the same tonality: “I beg, in all humbleness:/My God, pour the faith in my cup”. In the interview with Emil Șimăndan, the same idea occurs: Doinaș refers to Eugene Ionesco’s prayer, of whom he thought he was a fervent imbecile, a prayer he appropriated as well, both theoretically and as experience, in the *Psalms*: “Dear God, help me believe!”³⁷. Man relates to God as to a mystery; God represents our absolute otherness, the *Other*, “the one who cannot be investigated, but with whom we carry on a dialogue”.³⁸ Why things are like this? The author goes the length of claiming his audacity (which he confesses to have taken from Angelus Silesius) to presume that “maybe our incapacity of proving, of knowing exactly what God is, comes from the fact that God Itself fails to know that!”³⁹.

Besides the *explicit poiesis*⁴⁰, manifested in the theoretical texts, there is an *implicit poiesis*, in the *Psalms*. It is true that an author’s biography

București, Iași, 2006, p. 17 and sq. (subject *Psalms*).

³² These are determining elements for the biblical psalms; see *Ibid.*, p. 22.

³³ *Întorcerea acasă (Returning Home)*, p. 70.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ We have used the edition: Ștefan Aug. Doinaș, *Opere (Works)*, „Național” Publishing House, București, 2000.

³⁷ *Întorcerea acasă (Returning Home)*, p. 71.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 73-74.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 73-74.

⁴⁰ See Liviu Franga, *Poezii latini și poezia lor. De la Lucilius la Martialis (Latin Poets and their Poetry. From Lucilius to Martialis)*, vol. I, University of Bucharest Publishing House, București, 2007, p. 11-12.

explains only partially the creation; in this regard, Doinaş's view, which we totally sympathize with, is that the parts of author's life only provide the talent with the opportunity of manifesting itself: "Talent represents a potentiality!"⁴¹. We tried to read the *Psalms* viewing the relationship between the psalmist, as a poet, and God, the first shaping his identity through the otherness provided by the divinity. We selected only the metaphors/metonymies referring to the idea of creation, with all included elements: author/poet-text-reader. In *Psalms XII*, the idea of the poet bearing a curse as a consequence of the gift he was endowed with occurs: "Am I not cursed with the gift of speech?" Besides grace, there is reason, and the psalmist approaching the issue of understanding "the unspeakable heavenly algebra". In *Psalms XIII*, we discover an interesting metonymy: "I duplicate in my soul the text/obscure, out of which I am not able to make anything", entailing an ambiguous receiving: "the obscure text" related to represents either the world as God created, either "the voice" whispering the poet, the inspiration, and coming from above. In both circumstances, we notice the issue of reason effort to understand what remains meaningless. Every inspiration that failed to found the source in the "pure font", becomes fade: "Dead are all the fountains. Only the source is pure" (*Psalms XVII*). The poet's prayer, related to getting access to it, is edified by a novel metaphor: "Oh God, fit me out/with the calf's naïve nose that/it discovers fresh under the burdock leaves!" (*Psalms XVII*). We discover here one of postmodern aspects of Doinaş's *Psalms*, renewing the biblical vision, through usual language, willingly shocking because of the words he used ("calf", "burdock"), unedited so far within the religious poetry. "This style, descended in an unattended linguistic area so far by the religious poetry in Romanian, tends to incorporate, in its basic structure, even the common words, with no abuses in Ştefan Aug. Doinaş's lines"⁴².

God's metaphor as the perfect text, which the psalmist strives to understand, occurs in the *Psalms XXV*: "Complete, deep and luminous is the text/of Thy nature, Lord. In delight/I read it, and reread it, and sometimes/I even learn it by heart". The final raises another question in relation to the nature/origin of the Creator: "But tell me nevertheless: who subscribes/there, underneath, illegible?...". The idea presented in the theoretical texts

⁴¹ Ştefan Aug. Doinaş, *Mai-mult-ca-prezentul (Past Present)*, p. 81.

⁴² Al. Andriescu, *op. cit.*, p. 341-342.

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– of the Creator who fails to know who he is⁴³ - takes a poetical shape: “Or could it be that yourself, the living among the livings/what thou truly art, thou not know” (*Psalms XXVIII*). The psalmist is aware that behind the common word dwells the divine inspiration, an idea presented through a bookish metaphor – of certain classical influence – of the palimpsest: “What secret writing keeps on glimmering/under my writing? I am the palimpsest / of Your being thoroughly scraped/of the world old parchment” (*Psalms XXX*).

The relation between the word and the muteness⁴⁴, prolific in the Romanian literature (Blaga, Argezi, Al. Philippide, Doinaș, Nichita Stănescu), reoccurs as well in the *Psalms XLVIII* as the analogy between the divine creation, metamorphosed as the Verb, and the human creation, which is profane: “Thou, my Lord, for whom on earth stands the Verb/would You forgive me for I did not know to remain silent?”. In *Psalms XLIX*, the idea of the creation as the poet’s game occurs, as a world in relation to which the question whether it is “real” or “unreal” arises, but also the idea of the grace, of the inspiration, the source of which is ambiguous – terrestrial or heavenly: “My Lord, which of the spheres to I drink the grace: of this one or a twin one?” (*Psalms XLIX*). It becomes interesting the way in which Doinaș makes use of the dream subject; in *Psalms L*, the idea of perfection occurs, but also the idea of reciprocity: man and God are perfect, but each in the other’s dream: “Yes, my Lord: we are both perfect./But each dreamed by the other” (*Psalms L*).

The metaphor of the divinity as geometer of a Circle, towards so many “figures” tend, translates the idea of perfection of the divine creation, but also the poet’s aspiration towards the accomplishment of the artistic creation: “I do not expect either Your Verb of fire, or the step/Rotate upon me only your compass” (*Psalms LII*). The psalmist aspires to become the prolocutor of divinity; this time, the verb metaphor is used in relation to the poet: “but forever your verb I should be” (*Psalms LXIII*). The poet represents a mediator between the human and the divine, a merchant of whose weapon is the word: “My trading with the heaven/is always carried out through words, my Lord” (*Psalms LXXII*). The use of the metaphor of the

⁴³ See Note 38.

⁴⁴ See Dan Negrescu, *Invariante clasice în literatura română (Classical Invariants in Romanian Literature)*, Universității de Vest Publishing House, Timișoara, 2008, p. 70 and sq.

“trading” is not surprisingly for the man’s relationship with the divine, as long as, in the Roman Antiquity, this relationship is considered on exchange terms, of demand and supply, expressed by the principle “Do ut des” (“I give you so you can give me”), and Doinaş is educated within the classical tradition, in his work – both theoretical and poetical – the temptation for the classical approach is evident.⁴⁵ The poetry preserves something of the sacred meaning of things, and the poet is capable of communicating this meaning, which, for many, remains a secret: “[...] The poet/is the holder of a defunct meaning/always preserving the secret alive” (*Psalms LXXIX*). The idea of grace as a burden, that the person chosen to carry is required to do till the end, in order to be at peace with him, occurs again in the *Psalms LXXXI*: “My Lord, I feel like being vituperated by a holy breathe/that everything I put in words this day/will come tomorrow as a ghost”. In *Psalms LXXXIII*, we find a direct confession of the poet’s drama who feels the burden of his condition as a creator for whom both matters, the text form and the meaning/the idea: “Ah! Both feel heavy, the letter and the meaning”. The idea of the poet’s suffering, understood from the theological point of view, is not uncommon for Doinaş. For nowadays man, the suffering seems to have no spiritual explanation, it appearing as a natural degradation. In Orthodoxy, things are approached differently: God incarnated to suppress the sufferance, to give it a meaning. Through the incarnation, God do not change its essence. We deal here with *kenosis* or an emptying of its appearance, explainable through the love, seen as an emptying or self – limitation for the love one.⁴⁶ The analogy with the poet’s sufferance bearing the burden of his grace, we believe it is pertinent. The awareness that he is the bearer of a grace/a call is not uncommon for the psalmist, being aware of his condition as the second creator: “How else could we share the call?/Negotiated by cherubs is my inspiration” (*Psalms LXXXII*). Despite the fact that God described in the *Psalms* may seemed dropped from Its position of world Absolute, the poet makes a pathetic statement of love, following the postmodern terms: “God, constantly putting on an act/I will love you: this is my role” (*Psalms LXXXX*).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁴⁶ Father Prof. Dr. George Remete, *Suferința omului și iubirea lui Dumnezeu (Man Suffering and the Love of God)*, Biblical and Missionary Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church Publishing House, București, 2005, p. 18.

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We tried to read the *Psalms* through the relation of the psalmist, as poet, and God, the former revealing his identity through the otherness provided by the divine. We carried out this type of reading within a *poiesis* of the *Psalms*, considering the direct confession in the poetry related to the confession/thoughts in the self-referential texts. As any other great poet striving all his life to unveil the meaning of the world, not by accident, Doinaș approached in his last volume of religious poetry, with the conviction that the sought meaning resides not within the man, but outwardly, within God. We believe that the most suitable conclusion to this study represents the author's confession on the faith opening a path, in the very moment when it seemed to get nowhere:

“The act of faith consists less in finding what one may look for, since what one seeks already exists, than in pursuing to seek the thing that, in what one have found, remains still to discover. Due to such an experience, nothing ends, when all seems to, but, on the contrary, everything comes into being when everything else seems to cease to exist before us”⁴⁷.

⁴⁷ Ștefan Aug. Doinaș, *Mai-mult-ca-prezentul (Past Present)*, p. 104.