

# FAITH – “LIFE GIVER” IN LEON DONICI-DOBRONRAVOV’S PROSE

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## **Abstract:**

The dimensions of the biblical prose of Leon Donici-Dobronravov are in perfect agreement with some actual issues. Homo christianus, revived, should be seen as a response to the so-called “new man” of the infamous era. Many moments in the writer’s work are rendered through the prism of man raised in the clerical environment. In this context, both the biblical issue taken as an object of artistic exploration in his work and the presence of subjects, motifs, reminiscences from the Old and New Testaments can be explained.

**Keywords:** *Christianity, clergy, ecclesiastical environment, motive, biblical narrative, biblical prototype, ethical conscience, morality.*

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In the prose of the writer Leon Donici-Dobronravov, the biblical dimensions are in perfect agreement with current issues. He is the author who has tried to see the true face of things among those who consider themselves “God’s messengers on earth,” that is, of the clergy. Many moments in the work of the writer are rendered through the prism of the man raised in the clerical environment. In this context, both the biblical issue taken as an object of artistic exploration in his work and the presence of subjects, motifs, reminiscences from the Old and New Testaments can be explained.

The writer Leon Donici-Dobronravov, belonging to people par excellence moral and pious, is a lover of freedom and beauty. He found in Christianity the most adequate support in resisting the stepchildren of all kinds who haunted their lives and souls. God and the Church have been a steadfast believer in all hours of life — both in peace and in urgency. He came to the Church to pray for good, justice, and freedom, and there he went in a few

days’ respite to thank God for all that He had bestowed upon them. And if in the case of the invocation of the Divinity, the writer is pious, then, as for the clergy, Leon Donici, he critically infuriates him, exposing him. The writer does not condemn the whole priesthood, but only a part of it.

The presence of subjects, motives, reminiscences of the Old and New Testaments is more than natural by virtue of the fact that until his university studies in Yurievsk (1907-1908) and St. Petersburg (1908-1912) Leonid Dobronravov (so called until 1919, when he repatriated to Bessarabia) grew up, was educated and instructed in an ecclesiastical environment: Domnica, the mother of the future writer, was the daughter of the priest from the Ciuflea church in Chisinau, the father, Mihail Dobronravov young Leonid made them exclusively in theological institutions. In this context, both the biblical issue taken as an object of artistic exploration in his work and the author’s negative attitude towards the repulsive manifestations of the clergy can be explained.

The creative path, begun in Russian (in the second year of study) with the story *In Search of Eternal Truth* (1909), is rich in writings of various kinds. The title *In Search of Eternal Truth* is very suggestive of his entire activity. Leon Donici “a whole life has only been troubled for the truth” (Gh. Bezviconi). Educated in the Russian environment and having a Russian sensitivity, essential in his prose, Leon Donici-Dobronravov cultivated Russian values and spirit in the productive soil of the found homeland, Bessarabia.

Leon Donici anticipates the tendencies of prose at the end of the twentieth century and develops “hypostases of the tragic vision through an original “discontinuity” of the narrative, segmented in parables of bookish inspiration (the main text remaining the Book of Books - the Bible) or in quasi-semitic scenarios, the decipherment of which is indispensable for understanding the meanings of the text”.<sup>1</sup> Reality is symbolically conceived as a variant of the perpetuation of biblical prototypes or the materialization of apocalyptic prophecies.

Leon Donici’s short prose abounds in engines with functions to reveal the idea of one or another work. The short story *The Great Archimedes*, one of the most dramatic and codified narratives, has at its beginning

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1 Alina Ciobanu-Tofan, *Leon Donici’s Prose: tragic visions*, in *Metaliterature. Annals of the Faculty of Philology*, vol. 3, Chisinau, 2001, p. 130.

three motives, two of which the author selected from the New Testament under the well-known name of the Apocalypse with prophecies about the end of the world. The first statement: "and behold, a black horse appeared. He who rides on it had a scale in his hand." "The writer quoted from chapter 6 verse 5: "When the Lamb broke the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, 'Come and see!' I looked, and there appeared a black horse. He who sits on it had a scale in his hand." In the second case - "and he swore to the One who lives forever and ever ... that there will be no more time ..." - it is a somewhat modified expression taken from chapter 6 verse 6: "and he swore to the One who lives he is alive forever and ever, who made the heavens and the things on them, the sea and the things in it, that there will be no more delays." We do not know which edition of the Bible (Russian or Romanian) the Bessarabian writer used, but the second epigraph more corresponds to the Russian (canonical) edition of 1894 (final compartment Откровение): „И клялся Живущим во во вое , что̀ на нѣм, землю и всё, что̀ на ней, и море и всё, что̀ в нѣм, что времени уже не будет ”. It should be noted that the variant used by Leon Donici-Dobronravov is directly connected with the third motto borrowed from Plato: "... Then it hurts all the time the other seems to be no more than one night ..." [3, 65]. In the Great Archimedes, the engines are the real keys to deciphering the fundamental idea of writing: The Bolshevism that came to power is equivalent to the Apocalypse.

No less apocalyptic is the story in the biblical tradition Antichrist (1923). The protagonist of the narrative Luke (remember the Gospel of Luke); "The smartest man in the village <...> the only one who knew the book and always read the Holy Bible", sees and appreciates the technical progress from the beginning of the twentieth century (the appearance of the train in a village in the bottom of Russia) only by what what is said in the Bible and categorically opposes, to the point of fanatical tragedy, the most convincing arguments and facts of the teacher Ivan Mikhailovich. The main (and only) weapon of the old defender of biblical truth is conviction: "but the Bible says otherwise!" After the teacher explains to him, in the simplest terms, the theory of the iron train, Luke replies that "the heralds of the Antichrist will come and after that the beast will rise from the sea" [3, p. 130]. Before the conversation with the teacher Luke, "do not sleep at all and read the Apocalypse." Here he was able to detect the images "the beast that rises from the Deep" (11.7.); "Behold, a great red dragon

was seen, having seven heads and ten horns” (12.3); “And the great dragon, the ancient serpent called the Devil and Satan” (12.9); “I sat on the sand of the sea. And I saw a beast rise up out of the sea, having ten heads and seven horns” (13.1). Or another example from the story of the Antichrist: “With a wail, with a clang of iron, with sharp whistles, the first train arrived, the locomotive being adorned with a tricolor.

It happened as Luke had prophesied.

The apocalyptic beast out of the sea had an iron chest, three eyes, and breathed fire and smoke.”<sup>2</sup>

It is an irreconcilable, fatal confrontation between the New and the Old, archaic, between Today and Yesterday. The train, purchased in England, symbolizes, in the mind and static and ossified imagination of the old arch-conservative Luke, the “Antichrist”, who came from overseas. Totally overwhelmed by the Bible and especially by the Apocalypse, the protagonist, unwavering in his faith, supported by the Holy Scriptures, does not doubt that the appearance of the train is only the end of the world prescribed by the Bible. The gramophone of the teacher Ivan Mihailovici is for him a “devil’s car” and it must be burned. We are reminded of the last sentence uttered by Luca in the story and addressed with deep resignation and shocking bitterness to the teacher Ivan Mihailovici: “Now I understand who you are!” We find the meaning of the enigmatic phrase at the end of the story: “The next day [Luke] was found hanged in his house, in front of him on the table lay the old Bible open on the page about the coming of the Antichrist ...”<sup>3</sup>

Antichrist is also the physics teacher Ivan Mihailovici, the embodiment of progress. In turn, Luke is not a singular type existing in itself and due to biblical canons, he represents an entire social class of the Russian peasantry (a patriarchal mentality). In this sense, the “devil’s car”, the gramophone and the appearance not far from the village of the train, draw the boundary line between the present and the past, that is, between the biblical truth, shared by Luke and what the teacher Ivan Mihailovici promotes. In the last analysis, it is about the permanent confrontation between the old and the new in the social-psychological transition of epoch importance.

2 Leon Donici, *The Great Archimedes*, Bucharest, Romanian Cultural Foundation Publishing House, 1997, p. 132.

3 Leon Donici, *The Great Archimedes...*, p. 135.

The biblical subject about the well-known village of Emmaus Leon Donici-Dobronravov explored it in two stories of the same name (*On the Road to Emmaus*) published in 1921 and 1922, respectively. Rather, it recreates a certain atmosphere on Easter Eve. Back in his study, after passing through the crowded rooms of the deserted apartment (his wife, much younger than him, instead of going to church, goes to his lover), the old teacher (nameless) fixes his eyes. on the Gospel opened on the table and exactly where it was written: "And behold, on that day two disciples were going to the village of Emmaus, which was sixty stadia from Jerusalem; and they talked among themselves about all that had happened. As they talked and wondered, Jesus came and went with them. But their eyes were prevented from knowing Him. He said to them, "What are you talking about on the road? And why are you so sad? "..."<sup>4</sup> The gospel opened on the page with this episode is an artistic process consciously used by the writer. The events described in the story take place on the eve of the Resurrection of Jesus and the biblical narrative is also about his resurrection from the dead. The episode invoked from the depths of history is in perfect harmony with the relentless present of the old teacher.

After unintentionally finding out that he has been betrayed by his wife and feeling a torturous longing for his native village, he leaves everything and leaves with only a small suitcase in his hand. "The train was taking him south to the country. And the old man whispered softly: "To Emmaus, to Emmaus ..."<sup>5</sup> The final chord is permeated with sadness (this atmosphere is somewhat characteristic of the writer's entire creation), but at the same time the end of the story symbolizes an opening to another world, a purer moral, more human world, the biblical village Emmaus embodies its bright icon Jesus Christ.

A year after the publication of the story, the writer returns to the subject only tangentially and makes a much more independent version in volume. The narrative is immersed in an atmosphere of mystery and all the events surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth are reproduced as fresh memories of one of the twelve disciples of the Master, named Cleopas. It was he and his companion Joachim, a resident of the enigmatic village of Emmaus, who were the first to see Jesus Christ after his resurrection

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4 Leon Donici, *The Great Archimedes...*, p. 38.

5 Leon Donici, *The Great Archimedes...*, p. 39.

from the dead. Admittedly, the fact that Jesus appeared to the two fugitives from Emmaus is denied by some authors. As for Leon Donici-Dobronravov, he draws directly on the original source of inspiration, the Bible, more specifically the Gospel of Luke, which attests to all the details of Jesus’ death (burial and resurrection), but in mainly, his appearance to the two “disciples”, Cleopas and Joachim. Did they really exist in the capacity attributed by the evangelist Luke or did they not exist, they do not fall within the competence of the Bessarabian prose writer: they appear in the Gospel and this proof is sufficient. In fact, Cleopas and Joachim could also be characters imagined by the writer, fictions meant to enliven the narrative.

In Jerusalem, everything is in the greatest strain — it is the third day since the Master was crucified, and his disciples are waiting for the great miracle to take place — for him to rise again. Cleoping is gripped by the most excruciating expectation, who remembers in detail everything that happened to Jesus Christ some time before he was crucified - this reason dominates the whole narrative until the resurrected Master is shown to the two hikers on the village of Emmaus. It is worth mentioning the truly mysterious fact: how Christ appears unseen and unexpectedly, in the same way and disappears: his disciples are “decoded” by the Teacher according to certain signs known only to them (“Peace be with you”, etc.). Two phrases present in both stories - “What are you talking about together on the road? And why are you so sad? ”; “From Emmaus to Jerusalem was a distance of sixty stages” - allow us to believe that it is about the phenomenon of intertextuality meant to suggest the relationship of continuity between the two stories (the community of titles testifies to the same thing). The end on “i” in the actual story is the end: “From Emmaus to Jerusalem was a distance of sixty stages. And when Cleopas was weary, because he was weak and weary, Joachim took him in his arms like a child from time to time, and they both continued in the darkness of the night their hopeful way of seeing and knowing the mystery of the resurrection.”<sup>6</sup> This time the two disciples make the reverse journey from Emmaus to Jerusalem to tell the great miracle to the other followers of Christ.

In the short story *Old Prophet Gavril*, the writer presents a character who believes himself to be God’s messenger on earth. The ridiculousness of the character comes from the great gap between the modesty of his

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6 Leon Donici, *The Great Archimedes...*, p. 61.

standard of living and the exaggerated feeling of his own importance. The protagonist of the short story is modeled after the archetypal image of the Good Shepherd in the biblical myth. The symmetries, the harmony, the great peace of Nature - all are found in the face of the Donitian character. "God chose him, old Gavril, to be a great prophet," writes Leon Donici, noting that after his death, old Gavril saw his name "among other great prophets of the glorified God." in "The Great, True Bible, Unbroken by Pope Procopius," on "the great golden pages of silver letters" [55, p. 90].

Like the Good Shepherd, the protagonist had no wife, no children, and could not have, because for the character of Leon Donici it was important that God chose him to be his prophet and that he "Took him by the hand" so that he could tell him "everything, everything, everything".<sup>7</sup> Old Gavril considers himself the interpreter of God's will and is honored with the gift of predicting the future.

The character appears secluded in a sacred world - "in a hut on the edge of the village", on the banks of the Prut. He seeks supreme salvation through steadfast belief in ethical values. From the sacred space in which he lives, old Gavril has the highest perspective of human things and deeds, he sees the world in its distinct categories. The character presents himself as a martyr of sacred ideas and noble deeds.

In Saul, Donici insists on the ambiguous relationship of love and hate between the first king of the Jews and his successor, David. Saul's suffering, the contradictory doubts and feelings that grind him, the suicide in the end, take place in the rhythm of a biblical incantation, in which the stylistic ornaments, piled up almost baroque, flow, however, in a full musicality of the word. The pages have lyricism and grandeur, unlike the two stories of the same name, *On the Road to Emmaus*, where the Gospel episode, whether told with deliberate simplicity or just mentioned, discreetly suggests the power of Jesus to bring light and clarity, even and only by a lightning slip past those in great distress. The two biblical episodes - the reign of Saul and the appearance of Jesus on the road to Emmaus - manage through stylistic treatment to restore, on the one hand, the lush atmosphere of the Old Testament, on the other, modesty, simplicity bringing light and tranquility, specific to the New Testament" [1, p. XVI]. According to the researcher Lilia Porubin: "Intertextuality is a lucid assumed act, deliberate

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<sup>7</sup> Leon Donici, *The Great Archimedes...*, p. 90.



in the case of Leon Donici. The author uses it for a well-defined purpose, constructing his text as a lucid replica of another text. Relationships are manifested, first of all, at the level of multiple quotes and adaptations”.<sup>8</sup>

The writer remains throughout his life a deeply religious man, with a high ethical conscience; the author suggests in his work an atmosphere haloed by the light of communion with God; by the example of his life he demonstrated the inadmissibility of shameful, sinful, unworthy deeds (the Life-Giving short story). For Leon Donici, faith in God is a “life-giving force”, an unsurpassed force, faith being able, in the writer’s opinion, to bring in people’s souls a light of hope, a clarity, a clarity in thoughts and deeds, a sure support. to hard trials of the soul. The Bible and the sacred books of Christianity were for the writer the fundamental sources in his human and literary formation. Leon Donici exemplified the conflict between sentiment and social norm.

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<sup>8</sup> Lilia Porubin, *The Mystery of the Great Archimedes: Essay on the prose of Leon Donici*, Chisinau, Gunivas, 2009, p. 53.