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On the nature of Moldavia and Moldavians

Șerban Anghelescu

Descriptio Moldaviae mentions an antique statue representing an old woman surrounded by stone sheep. A perennial stream flows out of the old woman's sex. "It is, of course, difficult to say whether nature has shown its fantasy (*suos lusos*) in this monument or whether the skilful hand of an artist created it this way." The prince's hesitation becomes more complicated by invoking pagan magic in the phrases to follow. There are three terms: nature, the profane craftsmanship and magic, the sacred craftsmanship. Cantemir compares nature and culture in several circumstances. Sometimes nature produces perfect substances and forms, but danger lies behind perfection. In Ineu Mountains, the dew placed in a bowl separates into butter and water. The butter floating on the surface of the water is identical with the butter of animal origin. Paradoxical dew includes fat in its purity and transparency. The shepherds stop their sheep from pasturing in places with buttery dew because the naive creatures would pasture till they choke. Sheep do not obviously have a natural limit for ingestion. The purest gold is found in the sand creeks left behind. In the land of Hotin, on the banks of Nistru there are "little iron balls crafted by nature itself, so round that without any further intervention they can be used as cannon balls; it's just that the iron is not so good and unless it is melted, it is absolutely useless." Salt is so pure in salt mines, "crystal clear", that human interven-

tion is minimal and the spots emptied by mining rebuild themselves. The fields are even richer than the mountains. Millet, for example, gives a crop which is three hundred times bigger than the seeded quantity, a fact that is hard to believe, says Cantemir. It is said that the millet in the lower part of Moldavia and the apples in the Upper Country are skinless. A one or two cubit thin layer of earth, once removed, releases the pure mineral substance and the millet and the apple offer directly, without the skin, their edible parts from which nothing will be thrown away. Though the fruitful trees grew on lands as vast as forests, they gave so much fruit that the invading Polish soldiers did not bring supplies, thinking that eating the fruit they picked would satisfy their appetite. But they thought wrong. Eating fruit in excess would lead to serious illness. Trusting nature totally leads to disaster. The army had to go for culturally-treated cooked food.

Moldavian peasants "are very lazy, forced to work, they plough a little, seed a little, but crop a lot". The land is putting them out of poverty almost without their will.

Cantemir's Moldavia is the porch of Paradise. It reminds us of a legend by which God teaches Adam the exiled to make only one furrow, not many, which will provide them with plenty of food. The devil persuades Adam to make more furrows. The devil usually fights for expansion,

diversity, novelty. The gift of that unique furrow is lost. The nature of Moldavia incites to idleness. Moldavian peasants are like children. They live in the near future “till the fresh bread is ready”. They do not make supplies. Evil, be it natural (drought) or social (enemy expeditions) takes them by surprise and leaves them famished. The persistence is unknown to them. Moldavians fearlessly throw themselves in the battle, but retreat when defeated. We may assume that in comparison to the man of nature, the man of culture learns how to foresee hardships and how to resist them. Those from the lower part of Moldavia are prone to superstitions or superstitious beliefs and religions, worshipping idols, says the prince and he makes a list that makes us think of a series of religious holidays and extra human apparitions, in other words, an organisation of time and space made by the same peasants who had been accused earlier of bad timing. And here is the “natural” man, condemned for this, respecting the elaborated cultural “superstitions”.

When young, the boyars “of old times”, writes the prince, even the offspring of noblemen of high ranks had to deal with the phases of initiation. They were climbing the ladder slowly, from low-paid jobs to secret jobs only if they played the small parts skilfully and faithfully. Cantemir’s arrogant contemporaries were suddenly invested in high offices. They felt humiliated by the slow traditional progression. Haste produces totally ignorant “human monsters”; “not only are they incapable of leading a country, they have no knowledge about its traditions, and one will find no reason to praise them, maybe only one or two of them would be worthy of that, having been born with some good treat of character, without any intervention from outside and totally uncultivated.” Uncultivated human nature generates a sort of infantilism in peasants, defined by a minimal effort, immediacy in life, instability, and amongst boyars we look upon with sternness it even produces monsters. The nature of Moldavia produces mineral

perfections and a fabulous abundance of plants but hides risks such as the death of the sheep and the disaster of Polish armies. The statue of the old lady on Ceahl u cannot be placed decisively either in nature or on cultural territory. The observer remains undecided. Stephen the Great had Polish prisoners of noble descent carry the land of a future oak tree forest yoked like oxen. For the spectator who ignores this history, the forest is perfectly natural. Those who know traditions are aware of the fact that humbleness and victory are the origins of the forest. The forest is a monument, a place of memory and so it belongs to culture. The matter and the form of the monument are natural. Hence the ambiguity. *Descriptio Moldaviae* proposes a delicate balance between nature and culture. None of them deserve absolute credit. A poor nature would have probably led to assiduous work, in Toynbee’s terms. Natural richness makes the inhabitants of the blessed country drowsy. The ignorance of the boyars or peasants is blameable. The unrefined boyars are destroying the country. The naive peasants are their own enemies. There is however a supreme ruler that destroys every sense of logic: „only the special and indescribable divine Providence can be the reason behind the fact that the Ottoman Empire that was so big and terrifying, after overthrowing the entire Roman authority in Asia and a good part of Europe, after defeating Hungary, Serbia, Bulgaria and other countless kingdoms by sword and after subjugating by force the wise Greek people, could not make such a weak, uncultivated (incultum) people obey the sword and, though it dared so many times shake off the yoke it willingly received, they left its political and religious customs untouched“.

In God’s eyes, Moldavians, settled in Eden-like fertile places, were safe precisely because they did not worry about tomorrow, did not bother to learn too much, because learning drives you insane and rarely put their hands to work for the work of God.