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Nourishment – Matter and Spirit

Monahia Atanasia Văetiși

A few lines about our daily bread

Nourishment is always with us, from the moment we are born until we die; man has fallen from Heaven because of food, he is tamed and ennobled by refraining himself from food whereas redemption comes through nourishment too, through bread and wine, which stand for our Saviour's body and blood.

In the village world (and not only) the encounter with nourishment can be seen as a natural, biological fact: it stems from the need to consume what nature offers us in order to survive. It is a direct, immediate relationship between the peasant who tills the land and the land that yields its fruit and ensures his living. It is also a social and collective fact, a meal that establishes the connection between people, it puts family members together, favours an encounter with the stranger, with the traveller. It accompanies him and marks the most important life events: birth, wedding, death. This relationship is already mediated by a reference frame. Those who meet each other belong to a certain time and place, they have their own customs and traditions related to the way in which they lay the table, prepare food and actualize it. Thirdly, it is a religious, liturgical fact. Nourishment is symbolically articulated within a certain cult, it is now called offering, sacrifice, alms, Sacrament.

The relationship goes beyond the ordinary frame of daily life and of the link between people and embraces the spiritual frame of faith, of the encounter with God.

Therefore, the problematics of nourishment and food can be read from a religious perspective. The whole Scripture alludes to food, banquets, hospitality offered to strangers, sacrifices and food interdictions. The Gospels tell us about the wonderful multiplication of bread, about Jesus who made himself known in the breaking of bread after the Resurrection; the history of redemption is grounded in the Last Supper, in the course of which Christ gave himself as food to the apostles. In the heavenly kingdom we shall sit at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Man has fallen from Heaven because of food, by eating too little he will let go of the heaviness of his body and he will come to know God. Ascetic literature informs us that eating only bread and water, eating every other day, eating after sunset are real „recipes“ for purification and for banishing suffering. The Church Fathers teach these recipes to their apprentices from one generation to another. On the other hand, the delights of taste or smell, the surfeit of food, the surreptitious food consumption are sins mentioned in any confession ceremonial and can be encompassed by one of the deadly sins: gluttony.

The Church Fathers' collections of apophthegms abound in urges to food restraint uttered in a serious and imperative tone: *An old man told us: my sons, I spent my time fasting in the depths of the desert with other fathers for 70 years and there we used to eat nothing but vegetables and a few dates or He said again: my sons, satiating the hunger of the starving poor is a wise way to fast.*

The sin of gluttony can be opposed to the virtues familiar to all Philokalic Fathers: restraint, the fast, hunger, thirst, dry food, late-night eating, and scarce food. This happens because the fast is a powerful weapon against the evil, a weapon in the invisible war which, once understood and properly waged, will finally lead to victory and joy.

Consequently, nourishment acquires spiritual attributes, the course of the daily monastic life is a rhythmic ordering of two essential moments – the religious service and the communion dinner – whereas monastic ceremonies point out the mistake one makes by not participating in them. Canons are issued for those who do not go to church or to the refectory. The meal itself is transfigured and goes beyond the immediate level of satisfied bodily needs because during the meal a Christian brother is ordered to read to the others from the writings of the Holy Fathers or from the Lives of the Saints. It is spiritual nourishment, which keeps your mind alert and focused on God, and prevents you from relishing food as such.

The Typikon and the prayer books carefully designate the fast days and the prayers for absolution. A beautiful statement borrowed from *The Typikon of Saint Savvas*, which can sometimes be found in *The Triodion* or *The Pentecostarion* at the end of the religious service held during a certain day: „the brothers are gratified by wine and oil“ or „the brothers are shown a token of gratification for their exhaustion during the wake“. The *Triodion* contains clear directives for both bodily and spiritual nourishment, which

are used on the first Saturday of the Great Lent (the feast of St Theodore): „Saint Gregory of Nyssa's Homily in Praise of St Theodore is read out before Dinner. The food consists of boiled grains, white and black olives, and oily broths; should we have „coliva“ (boiled wheat), we also partake of two glasses of wine in honour of the Saint“.

Therefore, traditional society, together with religious experience, regards nourishment as one of the essential elements that articulate the life of its members. This is why the theme has a special place in an ethnology and anthropology museum.

The Nourishment that binds

Nourishment is the theme of the last exhibition room opened at the Romanian Peasant Museum as a part of the permanent exhibition previously designed by Horia Bernea. Ioana Popescu, Lilla Pasima, Cosmin Manolache are some of the most loyal followers of the original concept promoted by the museum who conceived and mounted this exhibition.

The scarcity of means, the rooms arranged as an open installation, the exhibits that reveal themselves, instead of being described, the subjective reconstruction of the theme, the emphasis laid upon the overall perception of the room as well as upon the possibility to „read“ each object place this room in the natural succession of the rooms that have already been designed for the permanent exhibition hosted by MȚR.

Suggested by an apple displayed in a case, the fall of man caused by food is the starting point of an ascending journey embodied by a spiral floor-board which highlights a few stages of the viewer's relationship with nourishment along the way that leads to the sign of victory: the holy Trinity painted on a church banner is the final point of the ascending journey. Glass-covered cases cut out in the floor spread here and there along the journey, displaying wheat, barley and oat seeds, corchoruses, and bakings. This is a



place for fasting, a space meant to remind us that „fasting thins blood but ennobles the heart and bring people closer to God“. We are climbing towards the icon of the holy Trinity painted on the church banner.

A few peasant art objects, graffiti, photos and texts are placed all around the space shaped by the intersections of light and shadows: manuality, a wide range of materials and perspectives, only few objects that rely on powerful suggestion. The texture of a towel reveals the silhouette of some churches with a staircase leaning against them and makes you think of a step-by-step climb to God's house. Several carpets displaying the Tree of Life motif are arranged like a cross and allude to the thresholds and crucial moments encountered along the way.

Everything complies with the same aesthetics of suggestion, of minimalist symbolism contained within a few signs. It is a multi-layered exhibition (in the proper and the figurative sense, due to the presence of multi-levelled significance). Tradition and the village world can be read in many ways in all the rooms of the museum: 1. by a direct, unmediated encounter with the object; 2. by understanding the context that created these suggested, not demonstratively exhibited, objects, by understanding their environment and usefulness, and 3. by having access to the written document, to the word texture that endorses, motivates or explains it. These three reception levels can also be found in the way in which the *Nourishment* room has been conceived. Ceramic vessels, towels, peasant household objects and tools are all piled (including their inventory number) in a warehouse-like corner resembling a museum glass case. It is a small core of a classic type of exposition (as is the case with all the rooms of the museum which are nonetheless arranged in a manner which seems to parody the very traditional exposition: see the agglomeration of mannequins dressed in peasant costumes, decorated eggs, corchoruses displayed one near the other in a real *horor vacui* spirit) whose ostentation breaks all the clichés about

ethnographic museography. The exhibition also includes all categories of peasant art objects related, or alluding, to nourishment. It ranges from glass icons depicting the Heavenly Supper and the Last Supper to utilitarian ceramics, textiles, and agricultural or household tools.

Secondly, the installations that refer to different times and spaces and the associations between text and image underlie the reconstruction or the suggestion of the cultural contexts that created and endorsed the object. One can make a few „stops“ along the ascending journey which captures man's life, each of them being an opportunity for having a meal: the repast of the three Fatal Sisters who spin, weave and cut the thread of life is suggested by three peasant household tools: the hoe, the pitchfork, and the rake. The connection can only be made by a text whereby the power of suggestion is immediately assimilated. The wedding dinner is also conventionally suggested by knot-shaped bread and an item of peasant clothing. The dinner for the dead, that is, the funeral repast, is suggested by the tree of the dead adorned with apples and knot-shaped bread and accompanied by the custom of commemorating the dead 3, 9, and 40 days after their death.

The third reading level that connects everything is offered by Room II, which is a halting place-study room, as many others in the museum, where documents, sources, and the fountainhead of all these things are stored. The text is generally integrated in the exhibition at the MTR in a very subtle way: there are visible, explanatory texts that are part of a certain installation, informative texts that are discreetly placed in the margin or enclosed in portfolios that can be consulted by visitors. On the other hand, there are parallel, complementary texts that give coherence to the theme and multiply reading grids, helping the visitor establish a relation between the language of objects and language as such. In the small study rooms designed in the museum the visitors can sit at a table where they can start reconstructing a village school in



writing. Thus, they immediately acquire a new status, they become an active part of the exhibition and, once inside, they have the chance to enter a specific world and to understand the manner in which it was created rather than simply walk through the museum.

At this point, the exhibition passes from a conceptual (recipe portfolios, histories of bread, liturgical texts about nourishment, books and collections of sayings about nourishment) and iconographic level (icons depicting the Last Supper and photos) to everyday objects. The ordinary household kitchen is presented by means of a few kitchen utensils, pots, recipes, cookery books, an apron, knives, spoons, etc. In a world in which rurality and Orthodoxy merge together, modernity and urban civilisation gradually make their presence felt by the dimension of domestic life, otiose facts, small clichés and trivial things that accompany any culinary success or failure. There is a more prominent anthropological dimension of nourishment here compared to the first room where the ethnographic background is more visible. Nourishment is related to the historical conditions of its production, to the values it imposes on society or to the cultural relations it generates. Drying herbs, traditional customs like pig slaughter, the sacralised ritual of making bakings for religious services hint at a wide array of social relations and representations and are living proof that nourishment is both the object and the subject of social structures and processes in all rural or urban societies.

The spiritual dimension and the religious experience make their presence felt here once again: apart from the *prayers before dinner*, the *prayers for the blessing of „coliva“* (boiled wheat), the *prayers said before tasting the grapes on the 6th of August*, prayers for the blessing of cheese and eggs on the Sacred and Great Easter Sunday taken from the *Prayer Book* and included in the portfolios that can be consulted by visitors, apart from the exhibited icons, choruses and communion bread – that are said to be part of the traditional village world in which the Church and faith were a living presence – we also find a list of persons invited to the royal dinner, which is considered to be a „Spiritual Feast“ because King Carol turned 7 and his first Prayer Book was offered as a gift.

This is one more reason to say that the permanent relation with the sacred preserved by the whole texture of the exhibition is sometimes vague, sometimes explicit. Everything is embodied by the sign of the cross. It has already been said that the cross becomes the motif that connects not only the objects exhibited in the last room, but also the whole exhibition hosted by the museum. In the village world and in the peasant art world that are finally put on display by such a museum, the cross is the universal sign or „Cruce-n casă/Cruce-n masă/Cruce-n toți patru cornuri de casă/Dumnezeu cu noi la masă!“ („The Cross blesses our home/The Cross blesses our food/The Cross blesses the four-cornered home/With God we will partake of food“), as the text above the entrance to the *Nourishment* room says.

