

THE MORAL MAN IN DIMITRIE CANTEMIR'S VISION

PART I

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Abstract: *What we intend to illustrate is what kind of human prototype Dimitrie Cantemir builds in his work, having as cultural model the Greek philosopher Plato.*

From this perspective, consistent advocacy for knowledge, for truth, is the foundation of the whole "moral edifice" which is especially dedicated by Cantemir in the Sentences (Sententii).

Cantemir's work is an invitation to self-knowledge, thereby contributing to the education of the Romanian human nature.

Keywords: *the moral man, cultural model, knowledge, the truth, European humanism.*

Dimitrie Cantemir, "the scholar prince", named so deeply and beautiful by the prominent historian Dan Berindei, seems to come towards us, with all the light and brightness gathered over in more than two millennia of Western culture that had preceded his existence. About whom, Nicolae Iorga had said that was "raised among books of wisdom" and that he managed exceptionally to "honour" his education by achieving spiritual fulfilment, unique in its kind.

Dimitrie Cantemir, deeply marked by the philosophy, and ancient literature in particular, even if he never said so, through his entire work and his whole life seems that he wanted to show us that he favoured Plato, perhaps from Seneca's perspective that "we must choose a superior man and have him always before our eyes, and we must live like he would always watch us and we must do everything like he could always see us". Cantemir, due to his esteemed works was renowned as philosopher, theologian, historian, mathematician, architect, geographer, musician, ethnographer, philologist, novelist, teacher, multilingual that is encyclopaedist, erudite. Not accidentally Moldavian prince was praised at the court of Peter the Great and considered as "the most learned man in Russia".

Cantemir, whose cultural model was Plato, wanted and did everything to fully fulfil his master's saying about knowledge: "Until kings become philosophers or philosophers become kings, things will never go well in this world".

His outstanding intellectual approaches, covered in mastering classical languages like ancient Greek and Latin, were also fully dedicated to his training and perfection of philosophy, wisdom of science, which Plato considered essential for the Prince.

His studies at the Greek Patriarchate Academy in Istanbul had facilitated to finally master 11 languages and to accumulate a culture worthy of his predecessor Plato. The illustrious representative of humanities and pre-enlightenment age Cantemir wrote most of his work in Latin, and his creation included: the field of philosophy as "Metaphysics" and "The small manual of general logic", the historical field "The history of the growth and decay of the Ottoman Empire", "The life of Constantin Cantemir" and "Chronicle of

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the durability of Romanian-Moldavians-Walachians" and the literary field "*The Hieroglyphic History*" or the scientific information field "*Description of Moldavia*" and "*The Mohammedan religion system*". Popular were and remained his pedagogical books such as "*The book of music science*", "*Obscure places in catechism*" or "*The little manual of general logic*". Of course, all these reference works were comprehensive, deeply marked by his complex vision of the world and the meaning of life on Earth, so that in each we will find data about the cultural spaces of intersection of the favorite areas illustrated.

Richness of his work, unprecedented in our culture, that had been done in a relatively short period of time, seems to suggest that he obeyed to another ancient urge "*Ars longa vita brevis*", because we can identify some "*creative rush*" of the prince-scholar aware that life, the thread of life, is too short for as much as he wanted to learn and to do and also aware that what you leave behind you is a chance each have for material eternity.

The content of his work, so diverse and valuable, is the one that can make him fit under the "golden gallery" of European humanism and the Enlightenment, and of course in this great content a special place has his vision of the man as a moral being. The references regarding Cantemir's concept we find, more or less, in almost all his works but this concept is most solid in "*The Hieroglyphic History*"¹ - considered as the first Romanian novel, but also benefiting controversial findings in the last three centuries (").

The most interesting work to analyse, from Cantemir's perspective of construction of the moral man, remains "*Sentences*"², which he presents as a part of this exceptional novel, starting from the sub-title. In connection with these "*Sentences*", there was an appreciation that the content brings Cantemir a little bit closer to Marcus Aurelius, the leading representative of the Stoics, next to Epictet. We do not know if that is true, but we can conclude about the moral profile, that Cantemir seemed to think that should characterize every man of his time.

"*Sentences*" are so valuable because they describe Cantemir's desire of how people of his time should be, hence, from here to the description of the society in which he wanted to live, was no more than one step. The reader's "*construction*" of the ideal world, in which so often Cantemir retreated to live happily and to be inspired, of course remains a challenge. Logically, to achieve such a goal for the reader it might create him the illusion of "*meeting*" with those inspirations that had supported the work of the person that represented the golden bridge between the East and the West; that's why the stake of such an intellectual approach is more than interesting.

"*Sentences*", even though apparently erratically written, seek at least a two fold aim: first to criticize the morals of the time, and secondly to correct them by supporting the fundamental moral values that the man and the society should aspire to. This presentation, mirrored, as a clear manner for antithesis, aims once again to entice the literary content of this part of the hieroglyphic history, in which it fits perfectly.

Consistent advocacy for knowledge, for truth, is the foundation of the whole "*moral edifice*" on which Cantemir devotes more here in "*Sentences*" than in any other work. Meanwhile, interestingly however remains the manner in which the reader could access the essence of this pleading, because Cantemir "*takes the reader*" through the labyrinth of the ordinary world in which both are living, showing him from time to time, the ROUTE towards the knowledge, towards the truth. The reader, that had become Cantemir's true partner, seems sometimes abandoned in this journey even by the writer himself. It is only an appearance, because, when for the moment he seems to let the reader by himself, Cantemir actually prepares him for the knowledge and then for the

¹ Dimitrie Cantemir, "*The Hieroglyphic History*", vol. I-II, Bucharest, Ed. Minerva, 1983.

² Dimitrie Cantemir, "*Sentences*", Bucharest, Ed. Gramar, 2003.

truth. Cantemir knows that this preparation must *"consume"* the moment of the reader's *"dialogue"* with himself in order to determine those changes in his mental structure and in his attitude that are meant to pave the way towards knowledge. It is an apparent abandonment of the reader, which takes place in several stages - which can symbolically mark his progress – interspersed these stages with permanent moments of *"retrieval"* with the writer. *"The retrieval points"* between the two are determined by subjective factors such as: that from a point on they *"agree"* that the contemporary world must be changed; that the moral model advocated by the writer is made entirely to please the reader; and through the *"defined partnership"* that they proposed to each other when they conclude as how lonely they are in the approach that become, at last, of both of them.

This foray into the two worlds, the real one characterized by human misery and the ideal one towards which the two - the writer and the reader – want to change the first word, it determines a connection, until an identification becomes between the two characters. Maybe Cantemir hoped that in his time, some reader will be found worthy to understand *"the building of a moral world"* or maybe he was satisfied to be himself a writer and a reader!?

Apparently without any connection, those things contained in the *"Sentences"* are in the same state of homogeneity in which the human nature will eventually be.

"The Sayings" contained in the sentences, form, with a far more careful analysis, a whole, came to *"pave"*, to the one inclined to reflect on them, their path towards achieving a true human condition.

The essential message, or perhaps more accurately, the quintessence of the messages transmitted by Cantemir to the people, through this exceptional creation, is apparently simple: the human condition is not a *"given"*, on contrary, it is a *"construction"*, but not many people succeed to achieve it. Undoubtedly, it is worthy, for each individual to try to rise to the condition of a man, which, however, from his existence, has the data necessary to begin the approach. Cantemir, with a perfect good - faith, *"tells"* to the reader where he should begin the real *"battle"* with himself, for his own evolution: from the science of things. So, here's the departure point of Cantemir's vision, for every rational being in its efforts to deserve the name MAN.

"As the science of things is the light of the mind

So their ignorance is the darkness of the consciousness".

So learn, you my reader, the things on this earth, first of all, you should shine and then you should look up - as Kant would say – to the starry sky above you, and at the moral world from inside you. We may add, with all the differences from the two philosophers invoked above, that after you have mastered *"the things"* about the environment, you, the reader, can dare to lean on you, and only then you can understand the *"message"* of Cantemir and Kant, or any other *"message"* of any philosopher. The mind, the reason, Cantemir says, it has to be first of all lighted up, the light refer to here is unique, special, and distinctive, generated by KNOWLEDGE, and this enlightenment of the mind is undoubtedly a sine-qua-non condition for the reader to begin to walk on his endless journey of his becoming. If proof were needed or not needed, but it seems that in order to cover both possible situations, to convince the reader of the depth of his statement, Cantemir is using here the antithesis; the light of the learned mind on one side, and darkening of the untutored mind on the other side. This antithesis, to the benefit of yet undecided one, will determine him to take the final option towards the light, towards the *"science of things"*, meaning towards the KNOWLEDGE. This is the first metaphorical *"presentation"*, from Cantemir to the reader, to the role of knowledge in *"building"* the human condition, presentation which is included in the Sentence number forty-eight. Not by chance.....

After that, the same reader is "left" by the same writer to reflect on those in the content of this work until the Sentence number seventy-six, Cantemir is addressing to the reader like that.

*"Just like the sunlight effects on the eyes,
The science can sustain the sniffing mind".*

Here is the "reward" for the reader, which "has succeed" to travel and especially to break up the meaning of those in the work of Cantemir. The reader gets to feel, in the "sniffing mind", because that's how he starts to transform his mind, a special blessing that he owes it to the science that he managed to acquire up until here. Certainly the latter, in order of the sequence presentation, referring to the KNOWLEDGE, to its acquisition and its role, in addition, may be as an incentive to the good – faith reader, but maybe tired to continue his way to find or to re-find himself, for that reader that has the "things needed" to gain access to the "touch" of the human condition, for that reader who although rarely has reached the true human condition, he has abandoned her. Obviously, there is or may be a third reader category: the one who has attained through KNOWLEDGE the human nature, he never abandoned it even more he ennobled it every day of his existence. Cantemir is, first and foremost, such a reader, because the "spirit" of this work, briefly reviewed here, allows, to come back at us all, some existential fulfillment of the wise man, coupled with the profound intellectual experience of the "humanity show" generated by those in his own Sentences.