

Theology and Classical Languages graduate, waiter, hall porter, classical Greek teacher who brought down the proverbial and academic persimmon, doctor in Theology, accomplished translator whose works have been published within the Romanian Orthodox Church's prestigious collection "Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești" ["Ecclesiastic Fathers and Writers"], doctor in Literary and Cultural Studies, but, most importantly, a priest who has preached for 11 years in different parishes all over Buzău and Vrancea, ION AION – the pseudonym he used for his debut – finally found his true calling, which is both agony and ecstasy: writing. His pen defrocked him, cast him out of the Holy Mother Church and cost him the affection of his family. All his trials and tribulations are laid bare here, in the book before you.

ION AION

THE
CONFESSION
OF AN ATHEIST
Priest

Translated by
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CURTEA @ VECHE

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ION AION

Spovedania unui preot ateu

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for the present edition

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I

Introduction into your old world

Old hags are the death of me! Early in the morning, I grab my communion bag¹ and go to mammy Zoița, a forlorn old woman, half paralyzed, but whose mouth whirrs enough to make up for the disability of her limbs. Providence, it seems, spared Zoița precisely what she holds most precious. She lived alone in an isolated shack in the village valley. There were still a few houses around but are all derelict since their owners had passed away. Oncel Zoe was the last survivor in this forsaken corner of the world that died before I could redeem or, at least, bury it. From time to time, Zoița was visited by Cocuța, a robust girl with a short neck and a similar mind, who supposedly “administered” her pension. It was Cocuța who called me, every forty days, to come by and give the old lady the Eucharist.

The gate with no latch is always open invitingly to guests, an irony, considering the old biddy’s solitude. Many of this earth’s

1. The term *communion bag* refers to an item which priests use to ensure that believers who are not in a position to go to church (due to illness or other reasons) can partake of the Eucharist.

woes must have stepped inside. The land was pale – an arid stretch of dried out dust, with only a few skew-whiff locust trees here and there – it looks a bit like the biddy's decrepit and mustachioed face. The house was modest and made of clay: glued, painted, then parched, cracked, patched, painted again, cracked again, its walls finally returning longingly towards their true purpose – that of falling flat, just like everything made flesh from clay ends up doing. Time, the great trickster, grabbed a corner of the roof and kept pulling it apart. The “inside” room was a small and dirty space, where the wind burst in through all the cracks, pores and broken windows stuffed with cardboard.

Once inside, only the wails of winter coming from all sides could compete, without too much success, with the old biddy's logorrhea. She didn't necessarily need someone to listen to her, for I, passing through her gate, sometimes heard her repeating half a century old dialogues by herself, laughing, asking questions, swearing, and such. Nevertheless, the old biddy was not completely crazy, I already knew her well. But, as any creature cornered by death, which defends itself with anything at hand, Zoița kept chattering away just to make sure that she was still alive. This was her therapy, her escape, her fountain of youth... and so she lived again, doing and undoing everything to forget her misfortunes. Once, during Lent, when I was writing the names of the old people who were supposed to receive communion the next day down in my notebook, I forgot her name and just called her Granny Literature, so striking the resemblance between the two seemed to me: ugly truths and beautiful lies all on top of each other, an awful chattering that we need in order to forget that life is so grim.

- 7.30 – Granny Literature (in the valley, next to the river)
- 8.00 – Uncle Victor of the Unburied (on Future Street, the house with large windows)
- 8.30 – Auntie Atanasia from the *cul-de-sac*

The great difference between the two terms of comparison (the literary phenomenon vs. the Zoița phenomenon) is that the old biddy also stank as though this were her greatest ambition. I don't know if this was part of her survival plan, but surely these were the last two rays of hope with which, for the time being, she banished death: empty words and an awful stench. Those who were brave enough to enter the four-five square meters that made up Zoița's place and by that, I mean holier-than-thou yours truly, the postman with her pension and the mentally retarded Cocuța, was, without a doubt, the smell. In a top ten of all the smells crammed together in this goblet of forbidden essences, the first one to strike you mercilessly – the top spot by a long shot! – is the latrine reek. It was as though an entire squadron had been defecating over the old biddy continuously for thirty-nine days, vanishing on the fortieth day, right before my arrival, but not without letting a few farts fly as they walked out. It was atrocious!!! The second and third spot pass almost unnoticed. You could only smell them here and there, solitary whiffs, when you took refuge towards one corner or other of the room, desperately looking for the breaths of air that sneaked in from outside. In the left corner, where a little table lay, always covered in leftovers, you could sense the cloying smell of mice, mixed with a rancid smell like you'd find in a Bulgarian restaurant (one of those “food-recycling” ones, that take what the customers leave on

their plates and reuse it the next day, standing by the glorious dicton *Love food, hate waste*)¹. To the right of the door, seeing as all the rest of the room was taken up by the biddy's bed, stood a wardrobe filled with ancient clothes bearing the stench of ninety years of life. And life does stink.

On my way to her, I keep motivating myself in any way possible and making survival plans:

1. You won't die, so stop panicking again!
2. When you enter, leave the door open for as long as possible, to let air in!
3. Pretend you've forgotten something outside and keep entering-exiting-entering-exiting until you get your nose accustomed!
4. Well then, don't breathe! Whatever you do, don't breathe!

And, in the end, plan B is always at the ready: if you can't take it anymore, to hell with the biddy, just get out of there. No looking back. Every time I go in, I am instantaneously overcome with cramps, involuntary contractions of the abdomen and asphyxia, letting me know I am about to throw up.

'Good morning, *bre*² mammy.'

And so, I enter the Kingdom of Shite. Here, the stale air has modified its composition so much that it became a material too dense and too noxious for my human lungs. Yes, Zoița was (still) the living proof of the huge force of adaptation thanks to which humans can live even in a world of

shite. They are no longer conscious of their amazing capacity to endure, but only instinctively feel the need to exercise it often; that's why they keep getting married, some doing it even several times.

'Come on, *fatherling*, *sărămâna*¹, it's great you came, I can't take it anymore, I'm dying, close the door! Where are you going? There's nobody outside, they're all dead. Come closer, mammy cannot see! How young you are! Eh, life flew by... Mind there, your holiness, you left the door open. Close it tighter, don't let the cold in! There, there...', the toothless volcano erupted.

As usual, I tried to save my skin with a blessed lie:

'Mammy Zoița, I apologize but I am in a terrible rush, I am going to be late for the Deanery, I have to get there this morning at once. They rang me very late last night to let me know. I would have come earlier to see you, but I didn't know if you were awake or not...'

And I quickly begin to read the litany.

'Our Lord Jesus Christ, Shepherd and Lamb, who washes away the sins of the world....' Then, oops-a-daisy, I skip straight to the middle of the prayer, or to be completely honest, at its end, as I feel like fainting. 'Behold, spiritual daughter, Christ stands unseen, receiving your confession with... ouch (a spasm)... with humility. And I am but a mere witness.'

All this while, the biddy keeps chattering furiously, with her mouth slightly drooping on one side, where she had been struck by paralysis:

1. *Săru' mână* (local pronunciation *Sărămâna*) is a common greeting word in Romania, addressed to persons to whom one owes respect. The literal translation amounts to 'Let me kiss your hand.'

1. Text in English in the original language.

2. *Bre* is a common way of addressing in Romanian villages.

'Father, is it alright if I sit on the bed? I cannot get up. You know from the last time, see the candle on the table there, wonder where the match is? There you go, that stupid Cocuța left the table untidy again. What can I do, father, she is handicapped, you know so yourself. Better dead than being like her, the poor soul! Bu' I'm more handicapped than her... Has it been forty days already? Life flew by... It seems the death bells are tolling, eh? Who are you burying today?'

In the end, seeing as I keep repeating 'Lord, forgive her sins' without paying her any heed, she concedes and shuts up for a little while.

'And I am but a mere witness, to confess before Him everything you will tell me. So beware, since you came to the doctor, do not go back unhealed.' The spasms have calmed down a bit, but that's when the torture began: I had to listen to her confession.

'Mammy Zoița, since your last confession, have you quarreled with anyone?'

'God forbid! With whom, *father dear*, they're all dead. I wish... Bu' I never had any quarrels, not even with that old drunk tart in the house behind mine, who died. You yerself don't know her, you came later in these parts. Her house was the first one you see as you step on the alleyway. Have you gone in there preaching about the Baptism of the Lord? How are things, I wonder? I helped her a lot, I helped them all, and she, that liar, says that she gave me back the money, bu' it seems I've turned crackbrain and I forgot, the shameless bit... God forgive me. That's what happens when you do good by others. She was about to die a while back, but I took pity on her and gave her money for the doctor, better if she had died then...

poor miserable bastard, that's how her mother and father were too... and... and... then... and more... but especially...'

One question is enough to start the biddy's verbal deluge: avalanches of phrases cut short by others, which impose themselves with even greater necessity, memories of a life whistling fast through bald gums, gossip about the neighbors who dared to die too quickly, variations and lamentations on the theme of human destiny, hers in particular, often concluded with an wholehearted fart. In my mind, the missionary vocation left me a long while ago: Go to the d... Son of a b.... Kiss my... F... you! Why, Lord, did you not numb her tongue instead of her legs?

Ten minutes had gone by, about ten times longer than I planned to stay. My internal organs were desperately putting pressure on me to leave, yet I felt I could not. Something was holding me back, and it wasn't any excess of priestly duty or any warm regard towards the biddy, but something that defied my self-preservation instincts, something that sprouted from everywhere inside me: I felt pity for her. Under my eyes, a human being was fighting death. Compassion is a wondrous miracle of life: it either stems from somewhere inside the DNA (that of humans and of a few other noteworthy creatures) or it blocks it completely like an outside spell, which suddenly transforms us in a tissue for other people's snots. And Zoița had filled me with compassion from head to toe, saturating my lungs, liver, all my innards, even spilling out through my eyes because I am on the verge of tears. The poor biddy was finished – all that was left of her were a few wrinkles and trembling gristle which served a despotic mouth. First, she lost her teeth, which were knocked out, I'd say, by the frenzied

currents of her logorrhea, rather than by her old age, then came the acute kidney failure, the stroke, the paralysis, the festering hives and all the others ails that she describes to me in great detail every time with utmost eloquence. Old age was whacking her from all angles. Death was well on top of her and was trampling her, but the biddy kept pretending not getting the message. A decent person would have dropped dead from the first try, or the second at best. But when it came to Zoița, not even death could remember how long it had been toiling in vain. Through a swift turn, the biddy had reached a favorite topic: her own family. In order to spare you from the same torment I had to endure each time, I will skip to the end (I am in a terrible rush in writing this).

'My grandson from the capital, mammy's dearest treasure, is the only one who calls me from time to time. He would come see me, little darling, but his mother won't allow him. May God give her a daughter-in-law like herself, and may she lie in bed for eight years alone like me and... and... fa-ah-ther p-p-pri...'

She finally quiets down for a little bit to be able to shed a few tears, although other times she could manage both at the same time. The biddy was sniffing under the priestly stole, and I above it, she because she could not escape death this time, I because I could not escape her. In other words, we were both crying with self-pity. For these last few years, since I started giving her communion, the old biddy's telephone lay broken in the same position, between the bed and the wall, with the receiver off the hook. The postman also confirmed to me that "auntie Zoița" cancelled her subscription shortly after she became paralyzed. And she kept telling me the same

lie, that her grandson was calling her. I still haven't figured out how to react:

If I reprimand her for lying during confession, that would mean disconnecting her from her "therapy" and slamming her right into the shite she's truly living in. Meaning I would behave exactly like a mediocre priest stuck in religious formalism, who does not understand the wonderful and unique relevance of his ministry, the profoundly humane one. It wouldn't be at all difficult to tell her: 'Mammy, lying during confession is a serious sin, for which you will be punished' (in other words: 'Did you think that this punishment is all there is? Wait until you die and see...') Or: 'Bre, if you lie now, the Sacrament is worthless. And you cannot take communion either.' Upon hearing this, my distinguished lady, meaning the stinky old hag, would surely protest with something of the kind:

'What do you mean, father? I am not allowed to take communion and I cannot die without taking communion, so where do I stand then?'

And then bring on the wailing. So, the first variant is out.

If I offered to help fix her telephone, she'd not be the type to appreciate subtleties at all, and would retort with an entire avalanche of lies to support the first one: that Cocuța was bringing her some smartphone, or rather the postman, in fact no, someone else that I do not know and cannot query... which would lead to an increase in both the number of sins and the amount of time I'd have to stay.

That is precisely why I chose the third option: I took advantage of the respite and quickly poured the communion wine into the little spoon. But the old hag was also on the

ball. She knew fully well that taking communion meant a sort of liturgical farewell and that she would lose her interlocutor. At once, she snorted her snots and promptly let me know through her rarefied and long moustaches that:

'Father dear, hold on, I have something else to confess!'

This is too much! I can't take it anymore! I feel I could kill her! To hell with all compassion and its jinxes!

As I quickly awake from the withdrawal of empathy, I feel the devastating stench which surrounds me from every side in industrial quantities! That very instant, a mouse darts from the corner with the little table, barely dodges my foot and disappears under the bed. Go to the d... Son of a b... Kiss my... F... you! Stinking old hag, may it be that I sing your final liturgy soon! I suppress my most sincere wishes again and lie to her in a fatherly way, putting on as firm a tone as I could, as though my entire life hangs only in the power of my voice:

'Mammy Zoița, I believe that (one needs to take great care in phrasing things at this point since 'It's difficult for you, being all alone' would be an imprudence resulting in other minutes of lamentations; that is why I tried) you miss the two of us talking longer. Me too (I already exited the sacred sphere of confession and professional obligations and dragged her into the secular space of strictly human relationships, between myself and her). But please understand that this time I cannot linger a single second longer (meanwhile, I gathered my stuff with the speed of a conjurer of magic tricks). We're done, lots of health to you! God's help! All the best!'

'Father dear, here is the money, wait, don't leave, I have to pay for the confession, otherwise it won't be received by God, my mammy used to say, God forgive her, she was very

faithful, you don't know her. She never missed church. It was more likely that the priest wouldn't show up to mass than her missing... Poor mammy, she had the church door made, without my daddy knowing because, if he had gotten wind of it, Lord, how he would have beaten her, he used to hit her anyway for no reason, when she had the door made she engaged some handymen from... whatchamacallit... drat... from that cursed place on the mountain side where mammy's relatives were from... *Father dear, the money, where are you off to?'*

When I gave her communion the first time, I actually turned back from the porch for the money, without knowing that the hand the old biddy was stretching towards me was empty. This was of course followed by continuous excuses, additional wails, artificial searches, countless promises, all in all, another few minutes of inhalations. Now, though, thanks to the accumulated experience and to the perfect priestly behavior, I was content with the mere ministry, without hoping for other fleeting goods. What's more, I even made the sign of the holy cross over my chest joyously as I hurried past the gate, taking in the fresh winter morning air. This world does not offer as much air as we would like to breathe...

'Sārāmāna... please draw the lock on the gate.'

Climbing the steep hill on the deserted village path, my eyes filled with tears, as many as could fit in between the eyelids without them falling on my cheeks. I didn't know why. Maybe it was the stinging cold in which I had sought refuge so desperately. Maybe I was happy I felt more useful than ever in my profession, helping an old biddy forget about her loneliness and death. That was no small feat. Or maybe because I could once more see death's vice crushing a human life and