

The ‘Leaping Babe’ History and Meaning of an Icon¹



THE JOY OF MONKS AND PILGRIMS

In the Monastery of Chevetogne there is a much loved and much venerated icon of the Mother of God of the Leaping Babe (*Взыграние Младенца*), painted in 1703 by Cyril Ulanov. It is displayed at the heart of the building opposite the former main entrance

¹ Translated from Father Antoine Lambrechts' article in *Irenikon* 2011, No. 1. "*La Réjouissance de l'Enfant*". It is difficult to find a suitable modern English word for the Russian *Vzygranie* which refers to the movement in Elisabeth's womb described in the Authorised Version as 'leaped' ("and the child leaped in my womb ..."). As discussed in the article, the word has different levels of meaning, sometimes nearer to physical movement, sometimes expressing emotion and thus lends itself to different words in translation. The French *tressaillir* does not transpose into English. I have found the best solution is to vary the term, sometimes with established usage, sometime using terminology I feel is appropriate. R.T.

of the old house where, with its tender look, it welcomes all who find themselves at the monastery. It has always been known and venerated by the monks, at least since the early years after the Monastery's foundation (1925), even if no one remembers exactly how it came to us². Older members of the community recall that when they were young they sang a Marian hymn before it every evening beseeching the Virgin's help and protection while reaffirming their monastic vocation. Nowadays, the icon is carried once a year into the Byzantine church for the long vigil of the Acatyist Hymn to the Virgin celebrated on the Saturday of the fifth week in Great Lent. At such times the icon lives again before our eyes. The Mother of God appears in our hearts and we find ourselves inwardly resonating with joy that we too are children of God.

In 1991 the Belgium postal service published it on their annual Christmas stamp³. In 2002 Father Denis Guillaume (1933-2008), hymnographer and indefatigable translator of liturgical texts, composed an office and an Acatyist for the icon in French⁴.

The iconography of the Mother of God, in both the East and the West, varies greatly. Titles attributed to her from hymnography and popular piety are without number. The Leaping Babe (*Vzygranie Mladenca*) is but one among many. But what is its origin and meaning? Is it merely sentimental – or is there something more than just a description of a little child joyful in its mother's arms? Does it have a deeper theological meaning?

Before we deal with these questions, let stay for a moment with the Chevetogne icon and consider its history, its iconography and to what 'iconographical type' it belongs.

ICONOGRAPHICAL TYPE AND INSCRIPTIONS

The icon of the Leaping Babe (or Playful Child) is one of the many variants of the type known by historians as the Virgin of Tenderness (in Greek *Eleousa* or *Glykophilousa*; in Russian *Umilenie*)⁵. In this case the Mother of God carries the

² It is thought to have been part of the Otto-O'Meara collection from which we acquired several other icons in 1928. However it is not found in the *Catalogue de la Collection de Mr Otto-O'Meara et de Mme, née Moselli (...) dont la vente aux enchères publiques aura lieu dans les salles de la Galerie Georges Giroux les lundi 15, mardi 16 et mercredi 17 octobre 1928*. Bruxelles, 1928.

³ Issued 23 November, 1991.

⁴ Denis Guillaume. *Office et Acatyste à la très-sainte Mère de Dieu devant son icône intitulée Réjouissance de l'Enfant, vénérée au monastère de Chevetogne*, œuvre de moine-prêtre Denis, dans: *Supplément aux Ménéés*, tome XVII (Octobre et Novembre), Nîmes, Editions Samizdat (chez l'auteur), 2005, pp 252-273 (7 novembre). For the author see *In Memoriam P. Denis Guillaume, moine polyglotte, traducteur, musicien, et hymnographe*, dans: *Lettre de Chevetogne* 30 (2008, Nr 1-4), pp. 76-80.

⁵ Cf. André Grabar, *Les Images de la Vierge de tendresse. Type iconographique et thème (à propos de deux icônes de Dečani)*, in: *Zograf* 6 (1975), pp. 25-30. For the author, the names *Eléousa* (Mercy) and *Umilenie* (Tenderness) are not identical: "Not only are these words not synonyms, but the Russian word defines the feeling the mother has succeeded in engendering in her child, whereas the Greek word renders Mary's quality to those who pray to her: it is she who is full of mercy towards them" (p. 30). And further, with regard to the term *spassovo Umilenie* (the Tenderness of the Saviour): "the mother caresses her child in order to arouse yet greater tenderness in him. The sense is towards the tenderness of the Child, not the mother" (*ibidem*, additional Note, p. 30).

Child Jesus on her right arm. With inclined head, her cheek touches that of her child who, in his turn, caresses his mother's chin and looks into her eyes. In his other hand the child holds a scroll symbolising the Word of God. The icon bears the traditional inscriptions MP ΘΥ, *Meter Theou*, for Mother of God and IC XC, *Iesous Christos*, for Jesus Christ, and also the epithet *Vzygranie Mladenca* (the Leaping of the Child) and the iconographer's signature on the lower border: "This holy image was renewed (*obnovlen*) in 1703, painted by the tsar's zograph⁶ Cyril Ulanov"⁷.

Until the fifties of the twentieth century the icon was covered with an *oklad*⁸ of late date and little value. It covered the ground and the borders but left the image itself and the inscriptions free. An old post card from the 1930s is evidence of this.

ORIGINAL WORK OR RESTORATION?

What does the signature on the lower part of the icon tell us? The words *obnovlen* (literally: renewed) and *obnovlenie* (renewal), when used in connection with icons, can have several meanings:

1. It can indicate the icon's "*invention*", i.e. its discovery, its first appearance, often miraculous, in a particular location. This invention is the origin of a local cult of veneration and a new name (toponym) for the icon.

2. Sometimes the word refers to the icon's *dedication*, its *inauguration* or its *benediction* during an office. It is in this sense that it is employed also for the dedication of a church (in Greek: *egkainismos*).

3. Finally, it can be rendered as the *restoration*, the *renovation* or the *repainting* of an old damaged icon. There are even certain cases, if the icon is beyond recovery, where the painter is free to use the panel on which to repaint an entirely new icon⁹.

In our case it clearly means renovation in the full sense of the word rather than the minimal restoration that might be done today. Of the sixty or more surviving works of Cyril Ulanov, two are signed in the same way as the Chevetogne icon. In both cases¹⁰ it evidently means the renovation of the ancient icon in the style of the period, a restoration that conserved only the basic outline, the underlying plan of the icon. It is difficult sometimes to know exactly the state of the original icon, even using the most modern techniques, and to know to what extent the painter has changed the original icon. Furthermore, it should be noted, at this period (end of XVIIth – beginning of

⁶ The Russian words *zograph* or *izograph* (from the Greek *zograpfos*) could mean either an artist or an iconographer. Cf. *Slovar' Russkogo Jazyka XI-XVII vv.*, Vypusk, Nauka, 1979.

⁷ "Obnovlen sej svjatyj obraz 1703, pisal carev zograf Kiril Ulanov".

⁸ *Oklad*: revetment in precious metal on an icon.

⁹ For the different meanings of the word *obnovlenie*, see the *Slovar' Russkogo Jazyka XI-XVII vv.*, Moskva, 1987, Vypusk 12, pp. 105-106.

¹⁰ 9. Cf. N.I. Komaško, *Ulanov Kirill Ivanov*, in: I.A. Kočetkov (red.) *Slovar' russkix ikonopiscev XI-XVII vekov*, Moskva, Indrik, 2003, pp. 668-676, especially p. 673, Nr 13: icon of the Holy Saviour Enthroned, in the Dormition Cathedral in the Kremlin, originally from Novgorod, XIV-XV centuries, et renewed in 1697/1698; and p. 674, Nr 23: icon of Saint Dimitri of Salonika, in the same church, dated 12th century (?) and renewed in 1701 "po drevnemu načertaniju" (based on the old outline, in the old manner). In a number of other cases the underlying icon has survived ("ikona pod zapis'ju").

XVIIIth century), the same icon-painter could paint in quite different styles, sometimes more traditional, sometimes more modern¹¹.

In the present case it is interesting to compare the Chevetogne *Vzygranie Mladenca* with other icons of the Mother of God entirely painted by Cyril Ulanov¹². On the latter there is more contrast in the play of light and shade and there is a greater variety of colour. We find there, for example, the same gentle looks and the same mother-child relationship as on our icon. However, it is in the finish, in the details and most notably in the icon's look that we recognise the hand and spirit of Ulanov.

THE "ZOGRAPH TO THE TSAR" CYRIL ULANOV

So what do we know about this iconographer who bears the title "Zograph to the Tsar"? Cyril Ulanov came from a family of iconographers from Yurevets¹³, a small fortified village on the Volga, half-way between Kostroma and Nižni-Novgorod¹⁴. His brother Basil and his son Ivan, both also icon-painters, regularly collaborated with him according to normal practice. We have no indication of the date of Cyril's birth, but we do know that by 1688 he was working as a master painter in the Armoury Palace in Moscow. From the beginning of the XVIth century the Armoury Palace (*Oruzheynaya Palata*) housed all those workshops producing necessary goods for the tsar. It was here that arms, clothing, tableware, icons, jewellery and all kinds of precious objects were manufactured by the finest craftsmen in the land. Very soon the young Cyril won admiration and praise for his mastery. There he learned the new 'nearer to life' (*živopodobnyj*) style of icon-painting that had been introduced by Simon Ushakov. However, he never turned his back on traditional iconography. He was commissioned to paint icons and whole iconostases for chapels and private residences in the tsar's court¹⁵, for the cathedral of the Dormition in the Moscow Kremlin, for sanctuaries and monasteries adjacent to the capital and further afield: Vologda, Novgorod, Kiev, even Moldavia (Suceava, Humor, Rădăuți).

However, towards the end of the XVIIth century political and cultural circumstances began to change. Certain of his patrons were dead or imprisoned. Henceforward there

¹¹ Consider for example the *Bogomater' Gruzinskaja* (Mother of God of Georgia), painted by Cyril Ulanov and his son Ivan, on which is the inscription "in accordance with the proportions and design of the Gruzinskaja in the Chernigov Monastery" "meroju I načertaniem kakov v Černigovskom monastyre imjanuemaja Gruzinskaja". Cf. Komaško, *Ulanov, Kirill Ivanov, op. cit.*, p. 674, Nr 36.

¹² See http://www.rus-ico.ru/artists/u/ulanov_ki/ (in appendix to the article by N.I. Komaško on Cyril Ulanov).

¹³ Jur'evic-Povol'skij was also the home of Saint Macarius of Unza († 1504), of the Archpriest Avvakum (1620-1682) and of the filmmaker André Tarkovsky (1932-1986). In the opinion of some the Ulanov family came from Kostroma.

¹⁴ For details on the life and work of Cyril Ulanov see: Natal'ja I. Korneeva (= N.I. Komaško), *Izograf Oruženoj Palaty*, in: *Literaturnaja učeba*, Nr 1, 1990, pp. 44-48; L.B. Sukina, *Carskie ikonopiscy Ulanovy v Pereslavie-Zalesskom*, in: *Istorija i Kul'tura Rostovskoj zemli* 2002, Rostov, GMZRK, 2003, pp. 365-373, and N.I. Komaško, *Ulanov Kirill Ivanov, op. cit.* (2003).

¹⁵ Most notably for Peter the Great's mother and for his first wife (Nathalie Naryshkina and Eudoxia Lopukhina).

would be fewer court commissions. By 1701 there remained only two icon painters in the Armoury Palace, Cyril Ulanov and Tikhon Filatiev († 1731). When Peter the Great disbanded the Armoury Workshops in 1702, some of the craftsmen established themselves in the new capital, Saint Petersburg; others dispersed. Cyril Ulanov became an independent icon-painter. His son and pupil Ivan, icon-painter to the tsarevitch Alexis¹⁶, stayed in Moscow. Cyril, now a widower, became a monk under the name Korniliy (Cornelius) at Krivozerskaya Pustyn (the Desert of Krivozerskaya) near the village of his birth. This small monastery on the Volga, alas, no longer exists. It was closed in 1917 and disappeared completely in the mid 1950's in an artificial lake, the Gorki Reservoir. Two of Isaak Levitan's most admired paintings¹⁷, *The Quiet Abode* (*Tikhaya obitel'*, 1890), and *Evening Bells* (*Vecherniy zvon*, 1892), together with some old postcards, keep the memory alive.



Isaak Levitan, *Quiet Abode*, 1890, The Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

¹⁶ Peter the Great's son, died in 1718.

¹⁷ Isaak I. Levitan (1860-1900), Russian painter of Jewish origin, friend of Anton Chekhov, famous for his landscapes in the Volga region.



Isaak Levitan, *Evening Bells*, 1892, The Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

This unassuming provincial monastery provided our icon-painter with a new environment for his work; it was a much calmer place than the Armoury Workshops and it freed him from economic concerns. To celebrate the fortieth day of his profession as a monk Korniliy Ulanov painted his first icon for the monastery: a "Mother of God of Jerusalem", which later came to be considered a miraculous icon¹⁸. It was destroyed during the Russian Revolution by a defrocked monk of the monastery, a former political prisoner of the tsarist penal colonies¹⁹.

In 1714, after five years in the monastery, Korniliy was elected superior of the small community. From that time on his work was mainly directed towards the monasteries and churches in the surrounding area. Shortly before his death, he withdrew from the role of hegumen (abbot) to take on the angelic habit (Great Schema) under the name of Karion. He died in 1731 at an advanced age. His tomb disappeared at the same time as the monastery church.

¹⁸ The story of the painting of this icon and its miracles was told some time later by the hegumen of Krovoezerskaja Pustyn', Leontius (†1714); it is partially reprised by Evgenij Poseljanin, *Bogomater' Polnoe illjustrirovannoe opisanie eja zemnoi žizni i posvjaščennyx eja imeni čudotvornyx ikon*, Saint-Petersburg, s.d., pp. 646-652: Ierusalimskaja ikona v Krivoerskoj Pustyni.

¹⁹ A slightly smaller copy was made in 1825 for the Russian Monastery on Mount Athos, Saint Panteleimon.

"THE CHILD LEAPED IN HER WOMB... "

Let us now return to our icon *Vzygranie Mladenca*. The name is usually associated with another, later (XIVth century) variant of the Mother of God of Tenderness also known by its Greek name *Pelagonitissa*, after its place of origin, Pelagonia, in Macedonia. "Here equally – writes Andre Grabar – the faces of both mother and child touch cheek to cheek, but the position of the child is different: with somewhat agitated movement, he is upright on his mother's knees and, turned towards her, his head thrown back, he presses his head against his mother's chin. He caresses Mary's cheek with his left hand while she, in her turn, holds him by one of his legs"²⁰.



Pelagonitissa 1491-2,
Macedonian Museum, Skopje

We can say that icons and iconographic types existed before particular names were assigned to them and often the names were known long before their inscriptions appeared on the icons themselves. Originally the inscriptions on icons were minimal and nearly always the same, regardless of geographic origin or iconographic type: MP ΘΥ for the Mother of God, IC XC for the child Jesus. These inscriptions served to identify the persons and to endorse our faith in them: the "Mother of God", "Jesus Christ" (=Jesus, the Messiah). Thus the names *Eleousa* (Merciful) or *Umilenie* (Tenderness) are not found on the oldest icons of the Virgin. It is from the beginning of the XIIIth century that titles, derived from liturgical or patristic sources²¹, were first inscribed on icons of the Virgin; names "that applied not to the iconographic types, whatever they were, but to the person of Mary herself. Consequently they remained

²⁰ Cf. André Grabar, *Les Images de la Vierge de tendresse, o.c.*, p. 25

²¹ Such as: Gorgoepikoos (Quick to Help), Episkepsis (Protection), Elpis tôn anelpismenôn (Hope of the Despairing) Hodigitria (She who Points the Way), Pammakaristos (All Blessed), Platytera tôn ouranôn (Wider than the Heavens), etc.

applicable regardless of which image of the Theotokos²². The same iconographic type could thus have different epithets and change its name according to place or time. The name on an icon is not an explanation of its iconographic type. It is not an expression of what we *see* in an icon. Rather, it expresses our belief in the subject or the person represented. It is not the picture's "title" or subject. It is a confession of faith.

This is manifestly true also for the icon *Vzygranie Mladenca*.

Here, admittedly, the epithet does also describe what we *see* on the icon: a child exulting in his mother's arms. This is why the eminent Russian art historian, Victor N. Lazarev, calling it "the Mother of God with the Playful Child in Her Arms"²³, gave, perhaps inadvertently, too restricted a meaning to *Vzygranie Mladenca*. On the one hand, as the icon of Cyril Ulanov at Chevetogne clearly demonstrates, the child Jesus does not 'leap' on many of the icons of that name. On the other hand, the epithet does indicate more to us than what we actually *see*. It speaks also of what we *believe*, knowing that the child's joy comes to him from his mother. She is the fountain of joy, its creator and its cause²⁴.

But can we not go further? The thrill of joy animating the child Jesus, this joy that comes to him from his mother – even though we may believe it – has no biblical foundation. In the New Testament it is another child who starts with joy at the approach of the Mother of God, namely Saint John the Baptist at the moment of the Visitation of Mary and Elisabeth. The story is told in the gospel of Luke (Lk 1, 29-49, 56) and read at Matins in the Orthodox Church on all the great Marian feasts:

"Thus, when Elizabeth heard Mary's salutation, the child leaped in her womb [vzygrasja mladenec vo čreve eja] and she was filled with the Holy Spirit. And she cried out in a loud voice saying: 'blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of the womb. And whence is this to me that the mother of my lord should come to me? For lo, as soon as the voice of the salutation sounded in my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy [vzygrasja mladenec radoščami vo čreve moem]. And blessed is she that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord'" (41-45).

This biblical passage, very well known through the liturgy, is the only place in all of the New Testament where the word translated (in the Authorised Version) as 'leaped' (*vzygratisja* in Slavonic, *skirtao* in Greek) is used – and furthermore, only twice – in relation to the child²⁵. The name *Vzaganie Mladenca*, therefore, can only come from

²² André Grabar, *Les Images de la Vierge de tendresse*, o.c. p. 30. See also Gordana Babić, *Epiteti Bogorodice koju dete grli [The epithets of the Virgin embracing her child]*, in: *Zbornik za likovne umetnosti* 21 (Beograd, 1985), pp. 261-275 (French summary on pp. 274-275)

²³ "Bogomater' s igrajuščem Mladencem", Cf. the article *Etjudy po ikonografii Bogomateri*, in: Victor N. Lazarev, *Vizantijskaja živopis'*, Moskva, Nauka, 1071, pp. 275-320, in particular pp. 291-298. A revised and extended version can be found in *Studies in the Iconography of the Virgin*, in *The Art Bulletin*, XX (1938) pp. 26-65.

²⁴ A possible explanation of the child's movement in his mother's arms, as seen in the icon, though to us not very convincing, is drawn from the gospel account of the Presentation in the Temple and from the iconography of the Presentation of the Mother of God in the Temple. Cf. I.A. Šalina, *Vzygranie Mladenca*, in: *Pravoslavnaja Enciklopedija*, Vol VIII, Moscow, 2004, pp. 105-107.

²⁵ In the Old testament, in the Septuagint, the word is found in Gn 25, 22 [English translations have 'struggle' (a.v.) or 'jostle' (tr.)] where Jacob and Esau are in Rebecca's womb (*igrasta že mladenca v*

this gospel passage. Its meaning can be formulated as follows: Mary *is* the 'joyful impulse' for every child, even before his birth, when this child's mother (Elisabeth in the gospel account), recognises in Mary the "Mother of my Lord" who comes to her meeting²⁶.

In other words to recognise that Mary is the child's impulse is equivalent to confessing that she is the "Mother of my Lord"; at the same time it is the recognition that she is the Mother of God (the Theotokos) and that the Child who is born is *my* Lord. It is thus also to recognise oneself –with joy – as a child of God.

The icon *Vzygranie Mladenca*, which the Russian church celebrates on 7th November, is thus more than just a touching image of the relationship between a mother and her child. It is our confession of faith in the incarnation, our belief in salvation. It is the faith we find in the joy of being children of God. It is this that the troparion composed by Father Denis Guillaume especially for the icon by Cyril Ulanov at Chevetogne wished to express²⁷.

You delight the Child you carry in your arms and you are equally the cause of exultation of him who leaped in his mother's womb when you greeted your cousin Elisabeth. Now that Christ has made us your children enable us, even us, to find in you, in contemplating your icon and venerating it, the joy and the promise of our souls.

Fr Antoine Lambrechts
Monastery of Chevetogne, 2012

nej; in Greek: *eskirtôn de ta paidia en autê*). But in that case the movement is a sign of their subsequent rivalry and in no way a manifestation of joy.

²⁶ It is therefore not surprising that in the popular piety of the Russians they readily pray before the icon of the Playful Child for successful birth-giving.

²⁷ Denis Guillaume: *Office à la très-sainte Mère de Dieu devant son icône intitulée Réjouissance de l'Enfant, vénérée au monastère de Chevetogne*, o.c., p. 255