The ‘Leaping Babe’
History and Meaning of an Icon

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.

Translated from Father Antoine Lambrechts’ article in Irenikon 2011, No. 1. “La Réjousissance 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 us. 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 Acathyst 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 stamp. In
2002 Father Denis Guillaume (1933-2008), hymnographer and indefatigable
translator of liturgical texts, composed an office and an Acathyst for the icon in
French.

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 joyfui 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 it's history, it's 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). In this case the Mother of God carries the

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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.


5 Cf. André Grabar, Les Images de la Vierge de tendresse. Type iconographique et thème (à propos de deux icônes de Dečanti), in: Zograf 6 (1975), pp. 25-30. For the author, the names Eleousa (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 zograph Cyril Ulanov".

Until the fifties of the twentieth century the icon was covered with an oklad 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 icon.

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 cases 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 XVII-th – beginning of

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6 The Russian words zograph or izograph (from the Greek zographos) 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 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").
XVIIth century), the same icon-painter could paint in quite different styles, sometimes more traditional, sometimes more modern. 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 Ulanov. 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 Yurevets, a small fortified village on the Volga, half-way between Kostroma and Nižni-Novgorod. 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 manufacture 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 court, 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, Râdăuți).

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

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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.
13 Jur'ev-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.
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 Alexis\textsuperscript{16}, stayed in Moscow. Cyril, now a widower, became a monk under the name Korniliy (Cornelius) at Krivoezerskaya Pustyn (the Desert of Krivoezerskaya) 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 paintings\textsuperscript{17}, The Quiet Abode (\textit{Tikhaya obitel'}, 1890), and Evening Bells (\textit{Vecherniy zvon}, 1892), together with some old postcards, keep the memory alive.

![Isaak Levitan, Quiet Abode, 1890, The Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow](image)

\textsuperscript{16}Peter the Great’s son, died in 1718.

\textsuperscript{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 icon. It was destroyed during the Russian Revolution by a defrocked monk of the monastery, a former political prisoner of the tsarist penal colonies.

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.

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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 iljustrirovannoe 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 *Vzyranie 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](image)

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 ቂ留守 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

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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 Theotokos". 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", 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 cause.

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 crve 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 crve 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 child. The name Vzagrani Mladenca, therefore, can only come from

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: Pravoslavnaјa 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 meeting.

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 express.

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 autē). But in that case the movement is a sign of their subsequent rivalry and in no way a manifestation of joy.

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.

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