

THE SKY AS LANGUAGE: CORRESPONDENCES BETWEEN LITERARY DISCOURSE AND ICONOGRAPHY

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Abstract

The sky does not function as a descriptive element, but as a symbolic theological language. Literary discourse takes up iconographic principles such as ontological verticality and uncreated light. There is a close connection between reading the text and reading the image. Thus, we understand that reading an image is synonymous with projecting an entire literary universe onto it. Ekphrasis helps the reader to penetrate the mysteries of icons. The essay book dedicated to the monasteries of Oltenia includes the images of the paintings, completed by explanations that give them life. The purpose of ekphrasis is to create in words a description so well done that it makes the reader easily imagine the thing described, even in a situation where this thing does not exist in reality. Therefore, ekphrasis aims to achieve verisimilitude. The mural painting of the Oltenia monasteries became the basic material of the ekphrasis in Valeriu Anania's stories. The sky functions as an intermediary language between the individual and transcendence, between sensory experience and spiritual revelation, to which we can apply an ekphrastic reading. The look towards the sky is not a romantic one, of escape, but an ascetic one, of interiorization. The sky does not promise an escape from the world, but a discipline of the look, a reordering of being. Thus, it becomes the language of divine law, not of reverie.

Keywords: *sky, iconography, language, revelation, ekphrasis.*

The paper proposes as a central hypothesis the idea that heaven does not function as a descriptive element, but as a symbolic theological language, built according to the canons of Orthodox iconography. In reflective and spiritual literature, the sky is no longer a simple decorative element, but becomes a **significant space**, carrying symbolic and theological meanings. The literary discourse takes on iconographic principles such as ontological verticality, uncreated light, chromatic essentialization and apophatic silence.

Referring to the moment of creation, we notice that on the second day God separated the waters

above the sky from those below. "And God said: 'Let there be strength in the midst of the waters, and let the waters be separated from the waters.' And it was like that. God made strength and separated the waters under the strength from the waters above the strength. And God called the Strength heaven." (Fac.1:6-8) (The Bible, 2024).

St. Basil the Great considers that the nature of strength is as fine as smoke. Some of the Holy Fathers affirm that it is either liquid in nature or of a different, purer and nobler, substance. Aristotle calls the sky the fifth element, other than the four primordial elements.

Starting from David's words, the shape of the sky is hemispherical: "The one who stretches out the heavens like a tent" (Psalm 103:3) (The Bible, 2024), and the prophet Isaiah says: "The one who made the heavens like a vault" (Isaiah 40:22) (The Bible, 2024).

According to the philosopher Louis Marin, there is a close connection between reading the text and reading the image. Thus, we understand that reading an image is synonymous with projecting an entire literary universe onto it. Painting remains, at least at the level of reception, tributary to the conception of reading taken from literature. We look at paintings or murals, but we interpret them by reading them and linking them to literature.

The medieval iconographic pattern is unique. It is neither a faithful copy of "profane" reality, as in the case of Caravaggio, but neither is it an original composition constructed by the artist in accordance with that idea of selection about which Poussin wrote. The iconographic pattern is an extremely strict ideographic canon, crystallized over the centuries, inherited through artistic tradition and sanctified by the authority

of the church. Neither the Orthodox mural painting nor the icon represent "compositions" in the traditional sense of the verb "to compose." Or the medieval painter does not compose, but transposes the image on the wall or on the support of the icon. The transposed image does not need a frame to separate the space of the representation from the real space. This image is not a representation that could interfere with the "profane" reality and that, in order to achieve the plastic unity of the work of art, must be separated from the latter. This image is, in fact, a kind of complex ideogram (山-mountain, 川-river, 人-man), which requires a completely different type of reading than the painting.

In the eighteenth century in the Romanian Lands, the current of spiritual rebirth – hesychasm – was experiencing a flourishing era, a fact also reflected in the iconography and materialized by a special particularity: the presence of **philosophers and sibyls** in the iconographic program. Seen as forerunners of the perfect human creature, they were revered not for their philosophical ideas and conceptions, but for their love of the word, truth, and wisdom. Valeriu Anania observes that "all philosophers have the crown on their heads, a symbol of the majesty of the spirit." (Anania, 1998) Painted as kings who reigned with their souls over the body, they were appreciated not only for their wisdom, but especially for their exemplary, modest, virtuous life. We can call them emperors of moral living, not just of the mind.

Thus, the pre-Christian philosophers appear in Christian iconography primarily as forerunners in the right life, as well as discoverers of the Truth. Ananias argues that "Christian thinkers hailed in Plato and Aristotle the purest conception that Greek thought has produced of divinity." (Anania, 1998) The philosophers are painted on the same level as the sibyls, "servants of the idolatrous temples who prophesied for the mother of Christ" (Dionysios of Fournas, 2021). The Sibyl designates one of the prophetesses of Apollo, not being attached to a sanctuary proper, nor to any temple. It is solitary, free in relation to people, independent and dignified, deprived of the feminine nature, dedicated to the divine. Unlike Pythia, who had certain moments of inspiration from time to time, the Sibyl is

possessed by the divinity and constantly manifests itself under her guidance. Sibyl is deprived of her femininity, she does not smile, being permanently restrained because of the responsibility she assumes. The Sibyls are important not for the chastity and virtuous life they led, not for their wisdom, but for their role in the economy of salvation.

Even if the iconographic manual does not give many details about the painting of the sibyls, in their hands the phylacteries they hold stand out, and what characterizes them are the following: their tenderness, sensitivity and purity, which shines through from the icons.

This essay aims to demonstrate that in the literary work *The Heavens of the Olt*, the sky becomes a **symbolic code common to literature and iconography**, generating deep correspondences between the literary discourse and iconography.

In the interview given to Eugenia Vodă in the show entitled *Professionals*, Valeriu Anania confesses: "One of my books is a dialogue between Bartolomeu and Valeriu, that is, between a theologian and a man of letters (*Heavens of Olt*). The whole book is structured on a dialogue, of course, inspired by Plato, but which is between two hypostases of one and the same person, who understand each other, do not understand each other, quarrel, contradict each other, but in the end they still coexist. The man of letters in me was born or manifested before the monk, who changed his name" (Minute 1:11) (TVR, 2014).

Literature, in its entirety, seems to be a dialogue between the narrator and the author, since the two hypostases cannot exist without each other. The narrator's hypostasis needs the hypostasis of the man with his own biography, which balances the tumultuous anxieties of the soul through the meditative force and artistic vision. Sharing the same genome, they disrupt, communicate, interrogate each other, embodying stage roles in turn, but finally harmonizing their convictions in literary creations, an expression of dwelling grace.

The collaboration of the two hypostases, the monk and the writer, is also noticeable from the way in which the writer caresses his name in *the Heavens of the Olt*, putting Bart and Val face to face, "basically being the duplication of a single

author." In relation to the two landmarks that the human being meets – the earth and the sky – within each one, the monk's aspirations are to communicate with everything that surrounds us. Thus, an external communication is highlighted, visible in the Christian interpersonal relationship, but also an inner one, which is related to a sensitivity exacerbated by the desire to feel and live to the fullest every vibration generated by the pulsations of the heart.

The book is more than a simple tourist guide or a work of history of the churches and monasteries in Oltenia. It explores the deep connection between Romanian religion, art, and culture, revealing both the spiritual and the deep meanings of places of worship and foundations. The book analyses the role of Churches and Monasteries in the spiritual life of the Romanian people, emphasizing their importance as sacred places and centres of tradition. The author emphasizes that these places are not just buildings, but also symbols that convey a rich spiritual and cultural heritage.

The volume *The Heavens of the Olt*, writes Răzvan Theodorescu in its preface, "is a Platonic dialogue about the spatial sacredness of Romanian Orthodoxy." "Sovereign ruler of a theology of nuances," adds the preface, the author "makes us part of his gradual, passionate discovery of the heavens in the parts of his native Oltenia. Of some heavens, one may understand, in the spiritual sense of the divine mystery ruling the world." (Anania, 1998) The peculiarity of this book, Nicoleta Pălimaru remarks, is the fact that in its pages "the author's scriptural hypostasis appears in a split posture. On the one hand as a writer, whose score is assumed by Val's onomastic, and on the other, as a theologian, present through Bart's voice" (Motoc, 2022).

Valeriu Anania uses **ekphrasis** to help the reader penetrate the mysteries of icons. The book of essays dedicated to the monasteries in Oltenia includes the images of the paintings, completed by explanations that give them life. "There is a kind of landing in the Normandy of our world of saints, who come to feast and rejoice with the characters of the stories, with all the Heaven that they descend to earth" (Bartolomeu, 2022). Therefore, the sacred and the profane sit at the same table. In fact, in the book *Out the Foams of*

the Sea. Pages on Religion and Culture, Valeriu Anania confesses: "The profane is located somewhere on the periphery of the sacred, but never outside it" (Bartolomeu, 1995).

The ekphrasis description is not a literary genre in its own right, but involves a literary and discursive technique, "a verbal representation of a visual representation" (Heffernan, 1993). The purpose of ekphrasis is to achieve in words a description so well done that it makes the reader/listener easily imagine the thing described, even if it does not exist in reality. Therefore, ekphrasis aims to obtain verisimilitude (the seed from which an entire aesthetic literature grew in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries), and in the alternative it aims to demonstrate the richness of the possibilities of language compared to the limitations of the visual. Literature receives and encompasses in its meanings two forms of art: painting/iconographic art and music.

If we analyse the musical ekphrasis, we find that we can mentally associate a painting on the walls of the Cozia Monastery and the church chant *Slava*, a moment of interpenetration in which Mary Magdalene descends and mingles among the characters of the story. The double hypostasis of a sinful woman immortalized in church painting and the man renewed through repentance, supports the Christians' effort towards spirituality. Likewise, Mircea the Elder descends from the mural painting of the Cozia Monastery, this being the only portrait in which the ruler carries a sword. With the intonation of the song *Lady of Powers*, it becomes present through the textual force of the song.

Ananias' prose manages to capture the decomposition of a painting into images that follow one another as in a film shot in slow motion. In this way, he breaks down attitudes, movements and facial expressions, characters from icons or frescoes into sequences. **The mural painting of the Oltenian monasteries became the basic material of the ekphrasis in the stories collected in the volume *The Memories of the apter Pilgrim*, a book conceived "underground," from a promise made to the prisoners in Jilava, that if he ever became free again, he would translate the stories into writing.**

The Memories of the apter Pilgrim and *The Skies of the Olt* are complementary. The common

landmark of the two volumes is **the fresco**, the mural painting that closes in its pores stories of yesteryear.

The story of *All three* has as its starting point the narrative fresco from the Surpatele Monastery, consisting of six scenes. The current Surpatele Monastery was built by Lady Maria, the wife of Prince Costantin Brâncoveanu between 1703 and 1706. Few know that the settlement has a very valuable painting, worked in fresco by three skilled painters: Andrei Iosif, Hieromonk Hranite and Stefan. In the text of the story, the narrator clearly delimits the way in which an icon is painted on wood from the one through which a church is painted: "In the layer of plaster a mysterious and very long work takes place, as the colours penetrate into the depth and meet the lime and sand. Everything undergoes an inner transformation... In this painting that the Italians call *in fresco*, the transformations from the inside sometimes last at least half a century, sometimes a whole century. Some changes happen here like those of the sky roamed by white and light clouds. Some colours soften, others become harsh, others perish for a while and appear again, changed" (Anania, 2004).

Valeriu Ananias proposes the **epiphany** (the manifestation of God) as a theme, through the icon depicting the Holy Trinity. The painting made in the Surpatele Monastery has as its source the icon of the Holy Trinity painted by Andrei Rublev. The original is currently in the Tretyakov Galleries in Moscow. The icon is thus used as a focusing lens. The Three painted in the icon appear near the monastery, as if they had detached themselves from the icon and represented the living entity. Identified only by the colour of the stichar, the middle one wearing blue-sapphire, and the other two Porphyry and Ruby, they are invited to the table by the master painter and his apprentice, the angel apter.

Before participating in the communion of the table, the three with identical faces enter the church to pray, but when they leave, the colour of their clothes changes, all turning grey. Therefore, identical clothes hid the mystery of those who wore them. The Paschal Supper is thus foreshadowed, where they cannot be distinguished, one being suspected in any one. Although no one speaks at the table,

communication is done intuitively. An endless joy and inner peace emanate from the atmosphere captured in this scene. Appealing to the chromatic key of the sequence, we can understand that grey means transformation, metamorphosis, the closeness through the worldly garment to the earthly man, the tangent with him. After the end of the meal, in the same ritual formula, the three entered the church again to thank God, and when they left, in the same initial order they had their clothes changed, Sapphire stepping in the middle of the two.

On the same evening, the painter depicts dinner in the fourth scene, keeping the particularity of the grey garments, unlike the other scenes where the colours of the garments differentiate them. The story itself is an **example of ekphrasis in which the description of a church painting is achieved by pouring it into the literary work**. Thus, in the incomparable of the beautiful story-memory of *the All three*, the utterance of the pilgrim apter, the angel without wings, the angel in the flesh – the monk, in essence, and also the monk-author – comes to round, to complete, through the verbal experience of the biblical episode, the evocation of the icon, fulfilling a "single comprehension." Abram's encounter with the Three Angels, illustrated in Genesis chapter 18, is one of the most interesting and mysterious in Holy Scripture. In the Orthodox tradition, the episode was depicted in the icon of Abraham's Hospitality.

In the work *The Heavens of the Olt*, the dialogue between Val and Bart continues by trying to find enlightening explanations. Thus, Val fixes the six scenes that make up the iconographic hora that guards the nave all around, summarizing their content: 1. Abram welcomes the three traveling angels and worships them; 2. While waiting for the preparations, the angels have sat on some stones and are resting; 3. Abram invites the guests to the table; Two of them have sat down, the third is about to take his place; 4. The three are presented around the table, and the hosts serve from behind; 5. Guests say goodbye, thanking the hosts; 6. The angels go to Sodom, whose profile can be seen on the top of a mountain. Bart wonders if the identity of the three can be specified, according to Rublev's icon, given the hypostases of the same being.

In Surpatele, the painter sets the icon in motion, undoes it in moments that precede it and others that follow it. Bart's amazement lies in the observation that the three people change their position in the scenes presented. The painter's idea was to render a theological concept: in the fourth painting, the classical feast scene, the middle place is taken by the Spirit, to His right is the Father, and to the left is the Son, hence the fact that the Son has kept His position at the right of the Father. We can imagine an equilateral triangle inscribed in a circle, which would have rotated 60 degrees on the right side. Thus, the moment of the epiclesis is led by the Holy Spirit. At the moment of the Liturgy, the Father occupies the upper position, the Son is found in the bread and wine, and the Holy Spirit ensures the transubstantiation in the body and blood of the Savior Jesus Christ.

The meanings of another detail observable in the painting of the monastery converge towards the same direction: the sign of blessing is emphasized in the hand of the Spirit and the Father, while the Son points with his hand towards the chalice. The same is found in the icon of Rublev, where the Spirit's gaze is directed towards the Father, in turn the Father looks with love at the Son, and his gaze is centred on the chalice. Val intervenes by proposing a new explanation: in the third painting, the one preceding the Eucharist, the Spirit sits first, the Father is caught sitting, while the Son goes to the seat shown by the Spirit.

Valeriu Anania emphasizes the influence of the arts on churches and monasteries, revealing how elements of architecture, painting and sculpture contributed to the creation of unique places of worship. He also emphasizes how these artworks reflect the faith and traditions of the Romanian people. The book offers readers a deep insight into Romania's spiritual world and its close connection to Orthodoxy. *The Skies of the Olt* is not only an exploration of sacred places, but also a meditation on their meaning and significance in the life of the Romanian people.

Joining the author, we believe that they are all that I found most disturbing, full of mystery, of divine thrill, in "The Holy Heavens of the Olt."

Beyond the aesthetic beauty of the ecclesial space and of the icons, in *The Heavens of the Olt*,

Bartolomeu Anania reveals to the reader the Beauty of the Beyond that is reflected in them, not so much as an irradiating reflection, but as an inner graceful connection, because, in the end, the spirituality of *The Heavens of the Olt* is essentially the Philokalia spirituality. If Plato, in his *Dialogues*, managed to put into words the paradigms of philosophical thought, Bartholomeu of Cluj put into this dialogue of his, between Valeriu, the writer, and Bartholomew, the archimandrite theologian, **the paradigms of a theology of sacred space and icon**, of a Romanian Philokalia spirituality, infused with philological depths and folkloric narratives, with many historical and literary digressions, unique in Romanian theology.

The spiritual riches of the iconography of his native Oltenia are rendered by Bartholomew the archimandrite, in his replies to Valeriu, in a "spirituality so thin" that the reader is led, through a continuous spiritual tension, to a land that seems enchanted; and indeed, the Orthodox sacred space is an enchanted land, because the Eucharist miraculously transforms not only the nature of man, but also the entire Cosmos. The approach of Metropolitan Bartolomeu Anania who, in *The Heavens of the Olt*, unravelled the mysteries of the spirituality of the sacred space and the iconography of Oltenia under the Mountain, reveals not only the depth of the theologian and philologist Bartolomeu Anania, but also his spiritual finesse in understanding the depth of the Romanian hesychastic Christian spirituality. Academician Răzvan Theodorescu, in the conclusion of his foreword at the *Heavens of the Olt*, emphasized the need to unravel these mysteries for the faithful, who should follow Bartolomeu Valeriu Anania, being a living and perennial paideia model: "The abode of the Lord, the 'domus ecclesiae,' permeated by the apophatic mystery of the East, is everywhere and always under the sign of a symbolism that is clearly required of each ... The eminent interpreter of this Orthodox place is, in the following pages, a chosen intellectual and a great believer. Therefore, dear reader, follow him as a precious guide, on the spiritual paths of a land of great antiquity and refined nobility" (Anania, 1998).

In this volume, Valeriu Anania constructs a true iconography of the sky, in which the literary

discourse intersects with the language of the sacred image. Heaven functions here as an intermediate language between man and transcendence, between sensible experience and spiritual revelation, to which we can apply an ekphrastic way of reading.

The gaze towards the sky is not a romantic one, of escape, but an ascetic one, of interiorization. Heaven does not promise flight from the world, but a discipline of the gaze, a reordering of the being. Therefore, it becomes the language of divine law, not reverie.

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