

A repentant sinner: representing the self in Nikephoros Ouranos' catanyctic alphabet*

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For Byzantines, catanyctic poetry offered a rich source of models for self-representation. In this paper I analyse the poetic strategies and literary motifs through which Nikephoros Ouranos (tenth–eleventh century) shaped the self in his catanyctic alphabet. In particular, I will focus on the intertextual strategies employed by Ouranos in order to model the catanyctic self, such as the identification with scriptural sinners, and the presence of biblical metaphors.

Keywords: Byzantine poetry; catanyctic poems; self-representation; Nikephoros Ouranos

Writing about the self was in Byzantium viewed with suspicion and limited to clearly circumscribed situations: to speak about oneself (περιавтоλογεῖν) could easily turn into arrogance and stand condemned by Christian ethics.¹ Nonetheless, there was a literary genre in Byzantium that allowed its authors (and readers) constantly to use first-person locutions and offer their self-representation without fear of being accused of immorality: the catanyctic genre.² Most Byzantine texts related to κατάνυξις

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1 S. Papaioannou, *Michael Psellos: rhetoric and authorship in Byzantium* (Cambridge 2013), 132–40; revised edition, Μιχαήλ Ψελλός. Ἡ ρητορική καὶ ὁ λογοτέχνης στὸ Βυζάντιο (Herakleion 2021), 170–5.

2 F. Bernard, 'The Poems "To Oneself" of John Mauroπους: traditions and self-representative strategies', in V. N. Vlyssidou (ed.), *Byzantine Authors and Their Times* (Athens 2021), 199–222 (201–2).

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(compunction) were written in verse. In catanyctic poems (κατανυκτικά), the poet always employed the first person, presenting himself as an inveterate sinner with a strong sense of remorse and the willingness to convert through repentance.³ In this kind of literature, tears often played an important role, as the outward sign of contrition par excellence.⁴

Here I will focus on the catanyctic alphabet of a renowned figure of Byzantine military and literary tradition: Nikephoros Ouranos (tenth–eleventh centuries).⁵ In contrast to the popularity of his prose works, among them the *Taktika*, letters, and hagiography, his poems remain little studied.⁶ By studying Ouranos' alphabet, I aim to deepen our understanding of the genre of catanyctic poetry in the Middle Byzantine period. After a brief presentation of the alphabet and its general characteristics, I will analyse the most significant verses of the poem, from which Ouranos' self-representation strategies emerge. I will address the issue of the self by outlining to which extent the poet draws words and images from the Scriptures and from Greek Christian literature.

The self in catanyctic poetry: a note on terminology

The self that emerges from Byzantine catanyctic poetry is a typological and preconceived self. It is not an autonomous source of meaning, but rather the product of Byzantine cultural and religious conventions, which offered models and paradigms for the

3 For a general description of catanyctic poetry, see A. Giannouli, 'Catanyctic religious poetry: a survey', in A. Rigo (ed.), *Theologica Minora: the minor genres of Byzantine theological literature* (Turnhout 2013) 86–109. See also M. Lauxtermann, *Byzantine Poetry from Pisides to Geometres: texts and contexts*, vol. 2 (Vienna 2019), 175–9.

4 On the subject of tears in Byzantine literature, see M. Hinterberger, 'Messages of the soul: tears, smiles, laughter and emotions expressed by them in Byzantine literature', in M. Alexiou and D. Cairns (eds), *Greek Laughter and Tears: antiquity and after* (Edinburgh 2017), 125–45, and 'Tränen in der byzantinischen Literatur: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Emotionen', *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 56 (2006) 27–51. For the importance of tears in the early Byzantine fathers, H. Hunt, *Joy-Bearing Grief: tears of contrition in the writings of the early Syrian and Byzantine Fathers* (Leiden 2004).

5 PmbZ 25617 (<https://pbw2016.kdl.kcl.ac.uk/person/143474/>). For a general survey of Ouranos' life and works, see E. McGeer, 'Ouranos Nikephoros', in A. P. Kazhdan et al. (eds), *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, vol. 3 (Oxford 1991), 1544–5, and M. Masterson, 'Nikephoros Ouranos, eunuchism, and masculinity during the reign of emperor Basil II', *Byzantion* 89 (2019) 397–419, esp. 405–8.

6 For Ouranos' letters, see J. Darrouzès, *Epistoliers byzantins du X^e siècle* (Paris 1960) 217–48. There is no complete edition of the *Taktika*; on partial editions, see P. Rance, 'The reception of Aineias' *Poliorketika* in Byzantine military literature', in N. Barley and M. Pretzel (eds), *Brill's Companion to Aineias Tacticus* (Leiden 2017), 290–374, esp. 342–4. On Ouranos' hagiographical activity, see D. Krausmüller, 'Religious instruction for laypeople in Byzantium: Stephen of Nicomedia, Nicephorus Ouranos, and the Pseudo-Athanasian *Syntagma ad quendam politicum*', *Byzantion* 77 (2007) 239–50: 246, n. 51. For what has been preserved of Ouranos' poetic production, see S. G. Mercati, 'Versi di Niceforo Uranos in morte di Simeone Metafraste', *Collectanea Byzantina*, vol. 1 (Bari 1970), 565–73; cf. M. Lauxtermann, 'Byzantine poetry and the paradox of Basil II's reign', in P. Magdalino (ed.), *Byzantium in the Year 1000* (Leiden 2003), 199–216 (210), hypothesizing that Ouranos wrote other poems which have not survived.

representation of the self.⁷ This means that the catanyctic self followed the expectations of Byzantine religious culture as to how believers could represent themselves.⁸ Accordingly, the self in Ouranos' poem is a product of the Byzantine religious culture of his time, according to which the 'I' of catanyctic poems was the voice of the penitent sinner before God.⁹

The poet presents himself as a repentant person, dominated by a strong feeling of remorse for his own sinful life. He longs for conversion and repentance and expresses his contrition through a mechanism of self-accusation.¹⁰ This type of self-representation is heir to patterns found in biblical poetry, and in the Psalms in particular. Indeed, the Psalms constituted the main model for Christian religious poetry in the first person.¹¹ Like the psalmist, Ouranos in his alphabet becomes the spokesman for every believer. Through expressions linked to the author himself, remorse and the need for repentance were perceived by the faithful as an individual and personal experience.¹² This offers every believer who performs the poem a model for the expression of his or her own repentance, whether in private or communal devotions. The 'I' of Ouranos' poem, and of Byzantine catanyctic poetry in general, does not speak only in its own name, but in the name of all the faithful.

This self does not correspond to any particular individual, but can adapt and shape itself to any Byzantine believer, given its universal nature. Even those verses that seem to contain information about the author's age or moral conduct should not be understood as biographical indications of the historical author. For example, the reference to Ouranos' old age in verses 16–17 must be interpreted simply as a topos of catanyctic literature.¹³ Therefore, the aim of this article is not to search for biographical or historical information about the author of the text. As mentioned above, the poem is ill-suited to the extraction of biographical information, even if one wanted to. The present analysis rather focuses on the strategies employed by the poet in the

7 P. Cox Miller, 'Strategies of representation in collective biography', in T. Hägg and P. Rousseau (eds), *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley 2000), 209–54 (221, n. 45). See also D. Krueger, *Liturgical Subjects: Christian ritual, biblical narrative, and the formation of the self in Byzantium* (Philadelphia 2014), 8–9.

8 Krueger, *Liturgical Subjects*, 36–41, and Bernard, *Poems to Oneself*, 202.

9 Lauxtermann, *Byzantine Poetry*, 193 esp. n. 116.

10 A. Giannouli, 'Die Tränen der Zerknirschung. Zur katanyktischen Kirchendichtung als Heilmittel', in P. A. Agapitos, P. Odorico and M. Hinterberger (eds), « *Doux remède... » Poésie et poétique à Byzance* (Paris 2009), 141–55.

11 Bernard, *Poems to Oneself*, 203.

12 Giannouli, *Die Tränen*, 55.

13 Ζωῆς τὸ θέρος ἤγγικεν (λευκαίνει γὰρ ἡ χώρα) / καὶ Θάνατος τὸ δρέπανον ἤδη προετοιμάζει, 'The time for the harvesting of my life is nigh approaching (the fields grow pale) / and Death is already preparing the scythe.' Here Ouranos is quoting Jn 4:35 (ἰδοὺ λέγω ὑμῖν, ἐπάρατε τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς ὑμῶν καὶ θεάσασθε τὰς χώρας ὅτι λευκαὶ εἰσιν πρὸς θερισμόν, 'But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting' (NRSV). Also in the Gospel passage, Jesus employs the image of the ripe wheat field with a metaphorical meaning, although not to indicate old age, as is the case in Ouranos. In the alphabet, the expression seems to allude to the poet's hair turning white. On the topos of old age in catanyctic poetry: Giannouli, *Die Tränen*, 151 and 153.

construction of the typological self in the context of catanyctic literary production. Thus, for the sake of terminological clarity, I will here employ the expression ‘catanyctic self’ to refer to the first-person voice of Ouranos’ alphabet. Since this voice employs exclusively the masculine gender to refer to itself, I shall do the same.¹⁴

The alphabet

The poem is the only *κατανυκτικόν* preserved under the name of Nikephoros Ouranos.¹⁵ It is an alphabetical acrostic and consists of 72 verses, in strophes of three lines each. The abecedarian structure was common in Byzantium, especially in early hymnography, even if it was not exclusively Byzantine. The first examples of alphabetical hymns are already present in the Old Testament, in Lamentations and some Psalms.¹⁶ The metre is the political verse, which aligns the text with the catanyctic alphabet by Ouranos’ friend, Symeon Metaphrastes.¹⁷ According to Lauxtermann, the *κατανυκτικά* by Ouranos and Symeon Metaphrastes are among the oldest extant catanyctic alphabets in decapentasyllables.¹⁸

In terms of content, Ouranos’ composition reflects the most common characteristics of catanyctic poetry.¹⁹ The catanyctic self expresses his contrition to Christ, by confessing his sinful way of life and imploring divine mercy. His compunction is shown by the tangible sign of tears: he exhorts himself to produce streams of tears (v. 21: *πηγαὶ δακρῶν*, cf. Jer 8:23), and to cry and groan, in order to purify his soul from sin

14 On the question of gender in catanyctic poems, see Krueger, *Liturgical Subjects*, 19 and 157.

15 Ed. A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, ‘Βυζαντινὰ Ἀνάλεκτα’, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 8 (1899) 66–81 (68–70); with the emendations by E. Kurtz, ‘Das parainetische Alphabet des Nikephoros Ouranos’, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 25 (1925) 18. Papadopoulos-Kerameus based his edition on cod. Athon. Lavr. B 43 [Diktyon: 27095] (s. XII), ff. 66^v–67^r. Other witnesses were known, but not used (see ‘Βυζαντινὰ Ἀνάλεκτα’, 66–7): Bodl. Barocci 131 [Diktyon: 47418] (a. 1260), f. 70^v; Esc. Ψ II 20 [Diktyon: 15226] (s. XIII), ff. 81^v–82^r. D. N. Anastasijewić, ‘Alphabete’, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 16 (1907) 479–501 (480, n. 2), identified a further witness from Mount Athos, Iber. 207 [Diktyon: 23804] (s. XVI), ff. 183^r–185^v, to which I add Mosq. Sinod. gr. 363 [Diktyon 43988] (s. XV), f. 195^r.

16 On alphabetical acrostics in Christian poetry, see E. Giannarelli, ‘Acrostici alfabetici cristiani greci’, in M. A. Funghi (ed.), *Aspetti di letteratura gnomica nel mondo antico*, vol. 1 (Firenze 2003) 263–82 (264–6). See also D. N. Anastasijewić, *Die paränetischen Alphabete in der griechischen Literatur* (München 1905), and (fundamental) K. Krumbacher, ‘Die Akrostichis in der griechischen Kirchenpoesie’, *Sitzungsberichte der philosophisch-philologischen und der historischen Classe der Kgl. Bayer. Akademie der Wissenschaften*, vol. 4 (München 1903), 551–691. Select bibliography in F. D’Aiuto, ‘Un antico inno per la resurrezione (con nuove testimonianze di «scrittura mista» d’area orientale)’, *Rivista di Studi Bizantini e Neellenici* 45 (2008) 3–135.

17 PG 114.132, corr. Lauxtermann, *Byzantine Poetry*, 178. On the friendship between Ouranos and Symeon Metaphrastes, see B. Caseau and C. Messis, ‘Saint Symeon Stylite le Jeune et Son Héritage au XIe–XIIe Siècle’, *Byzantina Symmeikta* 31 (2021) 241–80 (268).

18 M. Lauxtermann, *The Spring of Rhythm: an essay on the political verse and other Byzantine metres* (Vienna 1999), 21–3, and *Byzantine Poetry*, 177.

19 Giannouli, *Catanyctic Religious Poetry*, 89, lists the main characteristics of catanyctic poetry.

(vv. 28–30). Unfortunately, the manuscript tradition offers no information about the destination and contexts in which this composition was performed. Only the ms. Athos, Iber. 207 mentions in the title the musical tune to which the poem was to be sung: the unknown hymn Κριτὴν τοιάδε.²⁰ Although this musical notation suggests a sung performance of the poem, the late date of the manuscript does not allow us to state with certainty that it was also performed in this way in earlier centuries.

I provide here the first translation into English of the alphabet, printed next to the Greek text in the edition by Papadopoulos-Kerameus (1899) with corrections by Kurtz (1925).²¹

A.

Ἀπὸ χειλέων λόγους σοι ποίους προσοίσω, Λόγε;
ὄμματα πῶς πετάσω δὲ πρὸς οὐρανοῦ τὸ ὕψος,
ὄλος ἐξ ἔργων βόρβορος ὄλος ὑπάρχων ρύπος;

Which words shall I offer you from my lips, o Word?
And how shall I open my eyes to the height of heaven,
when because of my actions I am but mud, but filth?

B.

5 Βαρῶ γῆν, οἶδα, δέσποτα· μαιίνω τὸν ἀέρα
καὶ πῶς οὐ χάσμα κάτωθεν; πῶς οὐ σκηπτὸς ἐξ ὕψους;
σῆς τοῦτο πάντως ἀνοχῆς, σῆς ἀνεξικακίας.

I am a burden on the earth, I know, Lord. I defile the air.
Why then does no chasm open beneath me? Why is there no thunderbolt
from on high?
That this does not happen is only because of thy forbearance, thine
indulgence.

Γ.

Γνώμης ἐμῆς στρεβλότητας, ψυχῆς φιληδονίας,
οὐ φθάσει ἄστρων ἀριθμὸς οὐδὲ θαλάσσης ψάμμος·
ὄθεν αὐτοκατάκριτός εἰμι καὶ πρὸ τῆς δίκης.

Neither the number of the stars, nor the sand of the sea
could equal the perversity of my mind, the love for pleasure in my soul;
for this reason, I stand self-condemned even before the Judgement.

20 For cautious remarks about this hymn, see Lauxtermann, *Byzantine Poetry* 2, 177 n. 66.

21 See above, n. 15.

Δ.

10 Δεινὰ τὰ κολαστήρια τῆς ἐκεῖθεν ἡμέρας,
ἀλλ' ἐμῶν οὐκ ἀντάξια δοκῶ πλημμελημάτων·
διό, Χριστέ μου, δέδοικα καὶ τρέμω πρὸ τοῦ τέλους.

The tortures of that day will be terrible,
but I do not think they will weigh up against my sins.
That is why, my Christ, I fear and tremble before the end.

Ε.

15 Ἐγὼ σε, σῶτερ, τοῖς ἐχθροῖς προδέδωκα δολίως·
ἐγὼ σε τὸν φιλόανθρωπον ἐσταύρωσα δεσπότην,
ἀγνωμονέστερος εἰς σὲ φανεῖς καὶ τοῦ Ἰούδα.

I treacherously betrayed you to thine enemies, Saviour;
I crucified thee, merciful Lord,
showing myself more ungrateful towards you than Judas.

Ζ.

Ζωῆς τὸ θέρος ἤγγικεν (λευκαίνει γὰρ ἡ χώρα)
καὶ Θάνατος τὸ δρέπανον ἤδη προετοιμάζει·
σὺ δὲ τί πράξεις, ἄσωτε ψυχή, μὴ μεταγνοῦσα;

The time for the harvesting of my life is nigh approaching (the fields grow
pale)
and Death is already preparing the scythe.
What will you do, lost soul, if you do not repent?

Η.

20 Ἡμέρας, ἃς ἀνάλωσα, αἷς κακῶς ἐχρησάμην,
οὐδεὶς ἀντισηκώσει με τοῦ πάλιν ἐπιστρέψαι·
διό μοι ποῖαι νῦν πηγαὶ ἀρκέσουσι δακρῶν;

No one will compensate me for the days I wasted
and misused by giving them back to me.
So what wellsprings of tears will now suffice me?

Θ.

Θεοῦ μηδέποτε μνησθεῖς, θανάτου μὴ φροντίσας,
τί τῶν κτηνῶν ἀπέοικα; τί διαφέρω τούτων;
πῶς οὐ παραδοθήσομαι πυρὶ τῷ αἰωνίῳ;

Since I never took thought of God and never worried about death,
 how am I different from the beasts? How am I superior to them?
 How can I not be consigned to eternal fire?

I.

25 Ἰδεῖν οὐκ ἄξιός εἰμι, δέσποτα, πρόσωπόν σου,
 ἀλλὰ ζοφώδεις ἄθλιος ὄψομαι – φεῦ – ἰδέας,
 αἱ μοι καὶ συναντήσονται καὶ παραλήψονται με.

I am not worthy to look upon thy face, Lord,
 miserable as I am I shall instead see dark forms, alas!
 that will come upon me and take hold of me.

K.

30 Κολάσεις τὰς μενούσας σε, ψυχή, προανατύπου
 καὶ θρήνει σου τὰ σφάλματα καὶ κλαῖε καθ' ἡμέραν,
 εἰ βούλει μετὰ θάνατον εὐρεῖν μετριοτέρας.

Imagine, oh soul, the punishments that await you
 and lament your sins and weep every day,
 if you want to find milder punishments after death.

Λ.

Ληστήν, τελώνην, ἄσωτον σωθέντας, πάτερ, οἶδα,
 πλὴν πρὸς ἐμὴν ἀμύθητον πληθὺν πλημμελημάτων
 οὐδὲν οὗτοι παρώργισαν τὰ πατρικά σου σπλάγχνα.

The thief, the Publican, the prodigal son were saved, I know, Father,
 but compared to the unspeakable multitude of my sins,
 they did not anger thy fatherly mercy at all.

M.

35 Μηδεὶς ἐξαπατάτω σε, μηδεὶς παραμυθεῖσθω,
 ψυχή· τὸ πῦρ οὐ σβέννυται, ὁ σκώληξ οὐ κοιμᾶται,
 τὴν σὴν ἀπεκδεχόμενα πικρὰν ἐπιδημίαν.

No one should deceive you, no one should comfort you,
 soul; the fire is never quenched, the worm does not sleep:
 they are waiting for your bitter stay among them.

N.

Νῦν ἐμαὶ πράξεις ἄτοποι, νῦν ἐμῶν κακῶν πλήθος,
τὴν ταπεινὴν καρδίαν μου τιτρώσκουσιν ὡς βέλη,
καὶ τί ποιήσω πρὸς δυσμὰς ἤδη φθάσας τοῦ βίου;

Now my foul deeds, now the multitude of my sins
wound my base heart like arrows;
and what shall I do, now that I have reached the sunset of my life?

Ξ.

40 Ξένη ψυχή και πάροικε τοῦ πλάνου κόσμου τούτου,
τί τοῖς ῥευστοῖς προστέτηκας; τί κέχηνας πρὸς ταῦτα;
πῶς, ἄπληστε, τὰ μόνιμα μᾶλλον οὐχ ἤρετίσω;

Oh soul, you who are a stranger and alien to this deceiving world,
why are you attached to all that is in flux? Why do you gape at such things?
Why, my greedy soul, did you not rather choose what is stable?

O.

45 Ὅταν ἐμῶν εἰς πέλαγος πονηρῶν ἔργων βλέψω,
εὐθύς ἀπογινώσκω μου, Χριστέ, τῆς σωτηρίας·
ἀλλ' ἄβυσσος χρηστότητος τῆς σῆς ψυχαγωγεῖ με.

Whenever I look into the sea of my evil deeds,
I at once, oh Christ, despair of my salvation;
but the depth of your goodness encourages me.

43 πονηρῶν mss.] πονήρων Papadopoulos-Kerameus

Π.

Πολύ σου τὸ φιλόανθρωπον, φιλόανθρωπε, τοῖς σπλάχνοις
καὶ σὺ ζεις ἐπιστέφοντας (τοῦτό με πόρνη πείθει),
ἀλλ' ἐγὼ καὶ μετάνοιαν αἰτῶ [δὸς] πρὸ τοῦ τέλους.

Great is thy mercy, merciful one, in compassion
and you save those who convert – the prostitute persuades me of this –
but grant me repentance as well before the end, I beg thee.

Ρ.

50 Ῥυσθῆναί με κολάσεως, ῤυσθῆναι καταδίκης,
οὐ τολμῶ σοι προσεύξασθαι τῷ γνώστη τῶν κρυφίων,

ἀλλά τι καὶ φιάνθρωπον ἐκεῖ παραμιγῆναι.
 I do not dare to beg thee, who know my hidden secrets,
 to escape punishment, to avoid condemnation;
 but I beseech thee at least to mix in benevolence with them.

Σ.

Σύ, σῶτερ, ῥάβδῳ παιδεύσον, σύ με μάστιγι πληξόν,
 σὺ καὶ ῥομφαία πάταξον, σὺ καὶ πυρὶ με φλέξον·
 μόνον μὴ κερδησάτω με ἐχθρὸς ὁ ψυχοφθόρος.

Saviour, discipline me with the rod, strike me with the whip;
 wound me even with the sword; burn me with thy fire.
 But let not the soul-destroying enemy gain me.

Τ.

55 Τὰ δι' ἐμέ σου σφάγια τὸν πάλαι πλανηθέντα,
 εὔσπλαγγνε, δυσωπούμενος, ἅπερ ἐκὼν ἠνέσχου,
 ἔτι μοι μακροθύμησον, ἔτι δὸς προθεσίαν.

Merciful one, be persuaded by the afflictions you suffered for my sake,
 when I was going astray – afflictions that you willingly endured –
 and have mercy on me once again, grant me time.

Υ.

60 Υἱόν με σὺ κατέστησας, υἱὸν καὶ κληρονόμον,
 ἐγὼ δὲ δοῦλος γέγονα, πονηρὸς ἀποστάτης,
 καὶ δόξης ἧς ἐξέπεσα, νῦν ἔγνω τὴν ζημίαν.

You appointed me thy son, thy son and heir,
 but I became a slave, a wicked apostate;
 and now I know the loss of the glory I forfeited.

59 πονηρὸς mss.] πόνηρος Papadopoulos-Kerameus

Φ.

Φωνῆς ἐκείνης, δέσποτα, φωνῆς τῆς ἀπευκταίας,
 ἀκοῦσαί μοι μὴ γένοιτο, εἰς πῦρ ἀποπεμπούσης,
 ἧς ἐγὼ μόνος ἄξιος, τοσαῦτά σε λυπήσας.

Do not let me, Lord, hear that voice, the abominable voice
 that sends me into the fire.

Even when I alone am worthy of it, since I have so grieved you.

X.

Χειρῶν εἰμι σῶν ποίημα καὶ χαρακτήρ μορφῆς σου,
65 κἄν ἡδονῶν εἰς βόρβορον κείμαι συγκεχωσμένος·
ἀλλ' ἐπιστὰς ἐλέησον, μὴ ὄψιν ἀποστρέψης.

I am the work of thy hands and the likeness of thy image,
even though I lie covered in the mud of pleasures.
But have mercy, at thy coming, and turn not away thy countenance.

Ψ.

Ψυχὴ, κἄν νῦν γρηγόρησον· ἡ κρίσις οὐ νυστάζει,
ἀλλ' ὥσπερ κλέπτῃς ἐν νυκτὶ ἤξει πυρὶ διδοῦσα,
εὐθὺς εἰς πῦρ ἐκπέμπουσα τὸ φοβερὸν ἐκεῖνο.

Soul, awake even if only now! Judgement does not sleep,
but will come like a thief in the night and hand you over to the flames,
straightway despatching you into that terrible fire.

Ω.

70 ὦ πάσης ἀγαθότητος ἐπέκεινα θεέ μου,
ὃ μητρὸς ἀγαπήσας με τῆς φιλοστόργου πλέον,
εἰς σπλάγχνα σου κατέφυγον· μή με ἀποβδελύξῃ.

My God, thou art beyond all goodness,
thou who loved me more than a loving mother,
I take refuge in your mercy: do not abhor me.

Becoming a biblical sinner: the Bible as a yardstick for the self

Which words shall I offer you from my lips, o Word?
And how shall I open my eyes to the height of heaven,
when because of my actions I am but mud, but filth? (vv. 1–3)

In Byzantium, both in literature and in iconography, the posture of the contrite man is regulated by a well-defined code, which is suggested by the penitents of Scripture.²² Ouranos' alphabet opens with a representation of the catanycitic self through a meticulous description of his attitude. First of all, he is mute (v. 1): his contrition and shame do not allow him to address Christ. This condition is expressed by a contrast

22 Krueger, *Liturgical Subjects*, 212. See also the older but still valuable study by H. Maguire, 'The depiction of sorrow in middle Byzantine art', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 31 (1977) 123–74, on the iconography of sorrow in Constantinople, which also contains reflections on the gestures of penance.

between the poverty of the λόγοι of the catanyctic self and the authority of the real Λόγος, Christ. Such disgrace also affects the gaze of the catanyctic self: his eyes look down, since they do not dare to turn to heaven (v. 2); the same idea is also repeated in v. 25 of the alphabet.

Ouranos inherited this behaviour from the Scriptures. In the OT, Manasseh is depicted with the same low gaze. His penitential prayer is transmitted as Ode 12.²³ Verse 2 in Ouranos' alphabet clearly recalls Manasseh's prayer: καὶ οὐκ εἰμι ἄξιος ἀτενίσαι καὶ ἰδεῖν τὸ ὕψος τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἀπὸ πλῆθους τῶν ἀδικιῶν μου (Od 12:9).²⁴ The biblical figure of Manasseh is a significant example for the sinner self of Ouranos' poem, since this king became a paradigmatic icon of repentance in the OT. Initially, in the Book of Kings, Manasseh is presented as an impious and cruel monarch of Judah (4 Kgdms 21.2). However, in the *Paralipomena*, his character experiences a strong moral evolution: deported to Babylon as a prisoner, he converted and pronounced a penitential prayer to God, who heard him and saved him (2 Par 33:13).²⁵ The prayer of Manasseh (Ode 12) was so widespread in the Christian tradition that it was often quoted by the Fathers, especially in arguments and exhortations concerning repentance.²⁶

In addition to Ode 12, verse 2 of Ouranos echoes a famous episode in the NT: the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (Lk 18:9-14). In the Gospel narration, the Publican looks down, because he is aware of his sins and repents before God: ὁ δὲ τελῶνης μακρόθεν ἐστὼς οὐκ ἤθελεν οὐδὲ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς ἐπάραι εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν (Lk 18:13).²⁷

23 The Odes are a set of nine to fourteen liturgical songs drawn from biblical and apocryphal books. They were considered as supplements to the Psalter by the Byzantines (J. Knust and T. Wasserman, 'The Biblical Odes and the text of the Christian Bible: a reconsideration of the impact of liturgical singing on the transmission of the Gospel of Luke', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133/2 (2014) 34–65). See A. Ravasco, 'Ἐπιδαί. Odi. Introduzione, traduzione e note', in C. Martone, *La Bibbia dei Settanta. Libri poetici*, vol. 3 (Brescia 2013), 405–53. One might note that from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries onwards, Byzantine liturgical *Horologia* transmitted the prayer of Manasseh as an integral part of the office of the Great *Apodeipnon* during Lent (Krueger, *Liturgical Subjects*, 210 with bibliography).

24 'And I am not worthy to turn my eyes and see the height of heaven for the multitude of my injustices.' For a general presentation of Ode 12, see P. G. Borbone, 'Preghiera di Manasse', in P. Sacchi (ed.), *Apocrifi dell'Antico Testamento*, vol. 3 (Brescia 1999) 539–52.

25 For Manasseh's transformation from a sinner to an icon of repentance, see R. Ceulemans and B. Crostini, 'Why the Bible in Byzantium matters', in R. Ceulemans and B. Crostini (eds), *Receptions of the Bible in Byzantium: texts, manuscripts, and their readers* (Uppsala 2021), 1–30 (22–3) with bibliography. See also R. Cacitti, '«E ora piego le ginocchia del cuore». L'epigrafe dipinta della *Preghiera di Manasse* a Gerapoli di Frigia', *Acme. Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia dell'Università degli Studi di Milano* 60 (2007) 71–83.

26 Borbone, *Preghiera*, 544.

27 'But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"' (NRSV).

Ouranos closes the strophe by re-using a traditional metaphor to designate the sinner: he is dirty and muddied. This echoes the refrain of Romanos' hymn *On the Harlot*: τοῦ βορβόρου τῶν ἔργων μου.²⁸ The images of mud (βόρβορος) and filth (ρῦπος), refer to the biblical conception of sin as a stain.²⁹ Only the tears that Ouranos will later invoke will be able to clean and purify this filthiness.

Next to tracing the penitent attitude to scriptural sinners, Ouranos in the first strophe takes up the typical elements of the iconography of Byzantine contrition. For instance, a miniature in a contemporary manuscript (Vat. gr. 1754 [Diktyon: 68383]³⁰) shows a group of contrite monks, with crossed arms (f. 15^r). This picture is headed by a caption: Οὗτοι ὑπὸ τῆς ἀθυμίας καταπονηθέντες, ἄφωνοι καὶ ἀκίνητοι ἴστανται. Εἰς γῆν τὸ ὄμμα ἐρείσαντες.³¹ The gaze and attitude of the penitent monks in the miniature are identical to those of the catanyctic self in Ouranos' poem: at the beginning of the alphabet, the poet presents the catanyctic self according to the canons codified by the penitential literature and iconography of his time.

In the incipit of the poem, the references to biblical characters are indirect only. However, further on in his alphabet Ouranos explicitly mentions the figure of the Publican, together with the Good Thief and the Prodigal Son:

The thief, the Publican, the prodigal son were saved, I know, Father,
but compared to the unspeakable multitude of my sins,
they did not anger thy fatherly mercy at all. (vv. 31–3)

These are all characters from the Gospel of Luke, often cited as models of identification for Byzantine believers in penitential literature. In their hymns, Romanos the Melodist and Andrew of Crete took the figures of redeemed sinners from the OT and the NT as icons of repentance for the self: through this identification, the sinful 'I' nourished the hope of salvation, which the biblical models enjoyed.³²

However, in verses 31–3 the hope of redemption does not seem to touch the destiny of the catanyctic self. In verse 32, the motif of the multitude of sins committed by him

28 Hymn 21, ed. J. Grosdidier de Matons, *Romanos le Mélode, Hymnes. Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes. Tome III: Nouveau Testament (XXI-XXXI)* (Paris 1965) 20–43. Note that Andrew of Crete employs the corresponding verb in the *Great Kanon* 2.23, ed. X. F. Syriopoulou, *Ὁ Μέγας Κανὼν Ἀγ. Ἀνδρέου τοῦ Κρήτις* (Athens 2000): Ὡλισθησα ὡς ὁ Δαυιδ ἀκολάστως, καὶ βεβορβόρωμαι.

29 See G. A. Anderson, *Sin: a history* (Yale 2009), for the metaphor of sin as a stain in the OT. In this verse Ouranos seems to have taken as a model an alphabetical prayer to the Theotokos by Ephrem, *Prayer to the Holy Theotokos*, ed. K.G. Phrantzoles, *Ὁσίου Ἐφραίμ τοῦ Σύρου ἔργα*, vol. 6 (Thessaloniki 1995), 379.3: Βεβορβόρωμαι γὰρ καὶ ρερούπωμαι. Ouranos' debt to this prayer is also evident in other passages of the alphabet, such as v. 4, which resembles Ephrem, 6.379.5: Γῆν ἐμίανα, οἴμοι, ὁ ἄθλιος; or vv. 52–3, which echo Ephrem, 6.381.1–2: Πάβδον πῶς οὐ κατέπεμψεν ἄνωθεν ἀφανῶς, ἡ ῥομφαίαν πατάξει με.

30 The manuscript transmits the *Heavenly Ladder* by John Klimakos. On the codex, see P. Canart, *Codices Vaticani Graeci. Codices 1745–1962* (Vatican City 1970) 47–51.

31 'These, subdued by despondency, stand voiceless and motionless, gazing fixedly on the ground' (text and tr. Maguire, *Depiction of Sorrow*, 34).

32 On this point, see Krueger, *Liturgical Subjects*, 44–5 and 146–52.

recurs; in doing so, Ouranos precisely compares the catanyctic self to the three biblical figures of Luke's Gospel. He describes himself as even worse than them (v. 33): while the biblical characters – despite having committed terrible sins – were eventually saved by God because they repented, he seems rather resigned to a destiny of eternal perdition.

This attitude changes in the following verses, in which Ouranos mentions the scriptural character of the Harlot:

Great is thy mercy, merciful one, in compassion
and you save those who convert – the prostitute persuades me of this –
but grant me repentance as well before the end, I beg thee. (vv. 46–8)

Unlike verses 31–3, here the verb *πειθω* suggests an identification between the catanyctic self and the biblical Prostitute: *πειθω* clearly refers to the paradigmatic and parenetic function this character has for the self.³³ The story of the Harlot becomes a model and a lesson for him: despite the faults committed, sinners can be saved, provided they repent before they die. These verses thus imply a hope of salvation.

The tribunal of interiority: the self and his soul

An image which recurs throughout the poem, is that of self-accusation. It allows the catanyctic self to focus on his inner part, offering a representation of his interiority:

Neither the number of the stars, nor the sand of the sea
could equal the perversity of my mind, the love for pleasure in my soul;
for this reason, I stand self-condemned even before the Judgement. (vv. 7–9)

The strophe opens with an admission of guilt: the catanyctic self presents himself as an inveterate sinner, whose sins are beyond counting. Such a confession again alludes to the penitential prayer of Manasseh, in which the image of the sand is used to define the multitude of the king's errors: *διότι ἡμαρτον ὑπὲρ ἀριθμὸν ψάμμου θαλάσσης* (Od 12:9).

This admission of guilt continues with a self-accusation in v. 9. Ouranos chooses an unusual adjective, with a NT origin: *αὐτοκατάκριτος* (cf. Tit 3:11). As in the Pauline Epistle, Ouranos uses a technical term from juridical language (*κατακρίνω* being the verb that indicates condemnation).³⁴ The catanyctic self simultaneously acts as judge, accuser and accused, as does Romanos in his *Prayer on Repentance*: *τὸ συνειδὸς γὰρ ἑαυτοῦ καταδικάζει με*.³⁵ Much earlier, John Chrysostom alluded to this passage from Paul in his homily *On Lazarus*, within a juridical context:

33 The figure of the Prostitute in Byzantine penitential hymnography has been extensively studied by Krueger, *Liturgical Subjects*, 151–62.

34 Cf. LSJ s.v.

35 'For my own conscience condemns me'. Hymn 55.12, ed. J. Grosdidier de Matons, *Romanos le Mélode, Hymnes. Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes. Tome V: Nouveau Testament (XLVI-L) et hymnes de circonstance (LI-LVI)* (Paris 1981), 520. Note that, unlike Ouranos, who uses Paul's term, Romanos avoids the adjective and instead uses the verb *καταδικάζω*.

Ἄλλως δὲ καὶ πρὸ τῆς ἐκεῖ κολάσεως, ἐντεῦθεν οἱ πονηρευόμενοι καὶ ἐν ἀμαρτίαις ζῶντες κολάζονται ... κὰν μηδένα κατηγοροῦντα ἔχη, οὐ παύεται ἑαυτοῦ κατηγορῶν ἔνδον ... περιέρχεται πικρὸν κατήγορον περιφέρων τὸ συνειδὸς, αὐτοκατάκριτος ὢν, καὶ οὐδὲ μικρὸν ἀναπνεῦσαι δυνάμενος.³⁶

The link between Ouranos' verses and the passage from Chrysostom is obvious: the first alludes to the Pauline passage through Chrysostom's exegesis. Indeed, Ouranos not only recalls Chrysostom's juridical model, but also echoes the motif of the sinner who anticipates the verdict of Christ the Judge with his own self-condemnation (πρὸ τῆς δίκης, in Ouranos). As Krueger already noted, in the tribunal of interiority man's conscience enjoys an authority second only to that of God in judging moral conduct.³⁷

In the course of the poem, the catanyctic self also presents his self-accusation through another strategy: the dialogue between the 'I' and his own soul. Throughout the alphabet the self often addresses his ψυχή with a series of recommendations and exhortations: he urges it to repent in view of the terrible punishments of hell (vv. 28–30) and he also asks his soul rhetorical questions, with many reproaches (e.g. vv. 16–18). Of his ψυχή, the self only chooses negative terms: it is beyond salvation (ἄσωτε, v. 18), unrepentant (μὴ μετανοῦσα, v. 18), insatiable (ἄπληστε, v. 42). Through its impious acts, the soul even goes so far as to degrade itself: it desires earthly things, even though God created it naturally alien to the world (vv. 40–2).

The expression of these reproaches necessitates that the 'I'-voice doubles its self: on one side there is the 'I', the accuser; on the other side, his soul, the accused. Such an interior dialogue has a clear precedent in the Psalter, and in particular in Ps 41; 42; 102; 103 and 114. From the Psalms, this concept entered Byzantine hymnography, as Romanos and Andrew of Crete show.³⁸ But while in the original context of the Psalter the dialogue with the soul does not present accusations from the 'I', the later Byzantine re-enactments inserted this literary motif into the logic of the tribunal of one's conscience.

Between the eighth and tenth centuries, the literary motif of the appeal to one's own soul is found not only in properly hymnographic poetry: John Geometres, a contemporary of Ouranos, also reused this motif in his εἰς ἑαυτὸν poems.³⁹ Although in his compositions 'to himself' John Geometres invokes his own θυμός, rather than

36 Ed. PG 48.979: 'Even before the punishment to come, those who practice wickedness and live in sin are punished in this life ... even if he has no accuser,[subject is missing] does not cease accusing himself within ... He goes about bearing with him a bitter accuser, his conscience; self-condemned, he is unable to relax even a little.' (tr. Krueger, *Liturgical Subjects*, 15).

37 Krueger, *Liturgical Subjects*, 14.

38 See E. M. van Opstall (ed. and tr.), *Jean Géomètre. Poèmes en hexamètres et en distiques élégiaques* (Leiden 2008), 32, for the use of the biblical motif by Byzantine hymnographers. Note that the dialogue with the soul was also present in another genre of the so-called Byzantine 'personal literature', the εἰς ἑαυτὸν poetry; see Bernard, *Poems to Oneself*.

39 On Geometres' figure and εἰς ἑαυτὸν poems, see van Opstall, *Jean Géomètre*.

the ψυχή of Ouranos, the parallel between the two authors is evident especially in the poet's exhortation for his soul to awaken from its torpor:

Soul, awake even if only now! Judgement does not sleep,
but will come like a thief in the night and hand you over to the flames,
straightway despatching you into that terrible fire. (Ouranos' vv. 67–9)⁴⁰

The same warning also marks poem 54 by John Geometres, vv.1–2: Θυμὲ τάλαν, τί πέπονθας; ἀνέγρευο, μὴ σε χαλέψη / δαίμων ὁ ζωῆς βάσκανος ἡμετέρης.⁴¹ Even before the two poets, in the field of hymnography, Romanos the Melodist had included this motif in one of his compositions, by emphasising the urgency of the soul's awakening in view of the imminent Final Judgment (as is also found in Ouranos): Ψυχὴ μου, ψυχὴ μου, ἀνάστα· τί καθεύδεις; / τὸ τέλος ἐγγίζει καὶ μέλλεις θορυβεῖσθαι.⁴²

Feeling (un)worthy

In the first part of his poem, the catanyctic self portrays himself as an inveterate sinner, surely condemned to infernal punishment and unworthy of divine forgiveness. In the ninth strophe, he remarks his indignity before God, as he had already done in verses 1–2:

I am not worthy to look upon thy face, Lord,
miserable as I am I shall instead see dark forms, alas!
that will come upon me and take hold of me. (vv. 25–7)

Again the abjection that the catanyctic self has reached is indicated by means of the eyes: he was not able to lift them (v. 2), and now he reinforces this statement, by defining himself unworthy to see the face of God (v. 25). With this image Ouranos recalls OT language and thought.⁴³ Indeed, in the Bible the expression 'to see the face of God' assumes a very broad meaning: it can generically denote God's presence (the face as a synecdoche for the entire person), but can also designate salvation or punishment. God can 'show' or 'shine' His face (Num 6:25; Ps 30:17; 66:2), and in this way He reveals His divine blessing and benevolence. Only the righteous can contemplate the face of God (Ps 10:7; 16:15).⁴⁴ This biblical symbolism underpins Ouranos' exclamation: he is a sinner, and thus he cannot receive the divine salvation. On the contrary, he will only receive the 'dark sight' of hell

40 Verses 67–8 have also been translated in Lauxtermann, *Byzantine Poetry*, 176.

41 'My unfortunate soul, what has happened to you? Wake up, so that the devil – jealous of our life – does not harm you.' Ed. van Opstall, *Jean Géomètre*, 182.

42 'My soul, my soul, wake up! Why do you sleep? The end is coming, and you will be troubled'. Hymn 37.1-2, ed. J. Grosdidier de Matons, *Romanos le Mélode, Hymnes. Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes. Tome IV: Nouveau Testament (XXXII-XLV)* (Paris 1967) 242.

43 The motif of 'seeing the face of God' originates in the Bible. For this statement and an analysis of the expression in question, see G. Helewa, 'Il desiderio di "vedere il volto di Dio" nella pietà dei Salmi', *Ephemerides Carmeliticæ* 27 (1976) 80–143.

44 For this motif see M. S. Smith, "'Seeing God" in the Psalms: the background to the beatific vision in the Hebrew Bible', *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (1988) 171–83.

(v. 26), since ‘not seeing God’ indicates death in the biblical world (Is 38:11); the face of God is associated with light and life instead (Ps 33:6; 66:2).

The catanyctic self reiterates his own unworthiness before God through other scriptural images; he represents himself as a slave and apostate:

You appointed me thy son, thy son and heir,
but I became a slave, a wicked apostate;
and now I know the loss of the glory I forfeited. (vv. 58–60)

In this strophe, the hypotext is Gal 4:7 (ὥστε οὐκέτι εἶ δοῦλος ἀλλὰ υἱός· εἰ δὲ υἱός, καὶ κληρονόμος διὰ θεοῦ).⁴⁵ The core of this line is the acknowledgment of the dignity that God gave to human beings: men are no longer slaves, but heirs to God. By contrast, the catanyctic self with his abject behaviour proves unworthy, becoming a slave once more, even an apostate. This last term, which is not present in the Pauline Letter, can assume different nuances, depending on the context in which it is employed. In the theological language, it refers to the man who has turned away from God, and it was often used by the first exegetes to characterize the sinful characters of the Scriptures, such as Adam and Even for their disobedience to God.⁴⁶

However, the image of the condemned sinner changes in the course of the poem, finally becoming that of one who can be saved. In this manner, the catanyctic self changes his attitude, and he moves on from feeling unworthy of contemplating the face of God (vv. 25–7) to asking the Lord not to hide His presence from him:

I am the work of thy hands and the likeness of thine image,
even though I lie covered in the mud of pleasures.
But have mercy, at thy coming, and turn not away thy countenance.⁴⁷
(vv. 64–6)

The strophe re-writes a passage from Isaiah, who reminds the Lord that human beings are His creatures, and He should therefore not hide His face from them, but rather show His forgiveness:

Καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν ὁ ἐπικαλούμενος τὸ ὄνομά σου καὶ ὁ μνησθεὶς ἀντιλαβέσθαι σου ὅτι ἀπέστρεψας τὸ πρόσωπόν σου ἀφ’ ἡμῶν καὶ παρέδωκας ἡμᾶς διὰ τὰς ἀμαρτίας ἡμῶν· καὶ νῦν κύριε πατήρ ἡμῶν σύ ἡμεῖς δὲ πηλὸς ἔργον τῶν χειρῶν σου πάντες. (Isa 64:6–7)⁴⁸

45 ‘So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.’ (NRSV).

46 See C. Hornung, *Apostasie im antiken Christentum* (Leiden 2016), 13–14.

47 These verses have also been translated by G. Parpulov, ‘Psalms and personal piety in Byzantium’, in P. Magdalino and R. S. Nelson (eds), *The Old Testament in Byzantium* (Washington, DC 2010), 77–106 (97).

48 ‘And there is no one who calls on your name or remembers to take hold of you, because you have turned your face away from us and have delivered us over because of our sins. And now, O Lord, you are our Father, and we are clay; we are all the work of your hands.’ (NETS).

Isaiah's prayer, like Ouranos', is a plea for God's mercy. This supplication complements other biblical references in the strophe, such as to the Psalmist's plea to God not to abandon him, since he is the 'work of His hands' (Ps 137:8); or the reference to Gn 1:26-27 in the second part of v. 64.

Re-uses of Ouranos' alphabet by other Byzantine 'selves'

So far, my analysis has revealed the contrite and penitent nature of the self in Ouranos' alphabet. As noted above, another feature of this typological self is its non-specific nature, which makes it adaptable to any Byzantine believer. This latter aspect becomes clear from the re-use of Ouranos' alphabet by other believers in private devotional contexts, as the manuscript tradition of the poem illustrates.

The best-known case is the manuscript Athon. Dion. 65 [Diktyon: 20033] (s. XII inc.).⁴⁹ This was the private Psalter of an unknown monk Sabas.⁵⁰ In the initial part of the manuscript, there are eight pages of miniatures, six of which illustrate the fate of the soul after death. In the margins of these six miniatures, the same number of strophes from Ouranos' alphabet are quoted.⁵¹ For the purposes of this discussion, the most interesting case is the miniature in the upper register of folio 11^v. There, the death of the monk Sabas is painted. An angel pulls his soul, shown naked, out of the body, before the eyes of a congregation of monks on either side.⁵² This scene is accompanied in the left margin by verses 28–30 of Ouranos' alphabet, in which the 'I' invites the soul to imagine (προανατυπώω) the moment of its own death and the punishments that will await it in the afterlife.⁵³ Sabas seems to take the invitation literally, addressing Ouranos' verses to himself and his soul and making the image of his death concrete and alive through the depiction.⁵⁴

49 I rely on the dating by Parpulov, *Psalters and Personal Piety*, 96. For a general presentation of the manuscript, see I. Spatharakis, 'The date of the illustrations of the Psalter Dionysiou 65', *Δελτίον ΧΑΕ* 8 (1975–76) 173–77.

50 Sabas offers information about himself in the colophon on ff. 224^{r-v}; S. M. Pelekanides, *The Treasures of Mount Athos: illuminated manuscripts, miniatures, headpieces, initial letters*, vol. 1 (Athens 1974), 419). This Psalter and its miniatures have been extensively studied by Parpulov, *Psalter and Personal Piety*, 96–7, and V. Marinis, *Death and the Afterlife in Byzantium: the fate of the soul in theology, liturgy and art* (Cambridge 2016), 50–2 and 60–6. See also Lauxtermann, *Byzantine Poetry*, 176.

51 Ouranos' verses reproduced in the manuscript are listed in Parpulov, *Psalter and Personal Piety*, 96 n. 88. The re-use of poems in Byzantine Psalters was a very common practice. For other examples, see Parpulov, *Psalter and Personal Piety*, 96. A precise description of the miniatures and the verses that accompany them is given by A. Rhoby, *Ausgewählte byzantinische Epigramme in illuminierten Handschriften*, vol. 4 (Vienna 2018), 196–201.

52 Rhoby, *Ausgewählte byzantinische Epigramme*, 198–9.

53 The infernal punishments mentioned in v. 28 are depicted in the upper register of the preceding folio 11^r. There Sabas is depicted contemplating the infernal fire. In this case the miniature is accompanied by verses 25–7 of Ouranos.

54 On this point, Patrick Martin has developed some interesting reflections on the link between the text of Ouranos and the *Heavenly Ladder* by John Klimakos in his unpublished study on the subject of the Last Judgement in the miniatures of ms. Dion. 65. I thank Patrick for allowing me to read his work.

He inserts himself into the miniature, appropriating the ‘I’ of Ouranos’ poem and becoming the protagonist of the text. The monk probably used the poem in his personal prayer and extrapolated the most significant verses from it to frame his personal vision of the afterlife.

The second example is the epigram DBBE Type 4942, preserved in the manuscript Litochoro, Metochi ‘Skala’ 2, f. 235^v [Diktyon: 38758] (1226–1250).⁵⁵ The manuscript transmits the four Gospels, but the information about it is quite scarce, given the difficulty in consulting the witness and the brief description offered by Papazotos. The epigram in political verse precedes the colophon in the final folio of the manuscript.⁵⁶ Its ending is unfortunately not preserved. According to Papazotos, there were five additional lines, now illegible, which would have completed the acrostic Ποταμο[...] of the epigram.⁵⁷

- 1 Πολλὰ μὲν αἰσῶν τῆς δόξης σου, πολλὰ καὶ τιμωρία,
ὅταν ἀναλογίσωμαι τὰ τῶν κακῶν μου πλήθη.
Τὶ Χριστοῦ ποθεινότερον, τί καὶ τὸ τέλος; τίς δὲ;
Ἀπὸ χειλέων λόγους σοὶ ποίους προσοίσω Λόγε;
5 Μνήμη θανάτου τρύχει με καὶ τοῦ θανάτου πλέον.
Ὅρα, ψυχὴ μου ταπεινὴ, μελέτην ...

3 τί καὶ τὸ τέλος; τίς δὲ; | τί καὶ τῷ τέλος τῆσδε; Papazotos (1987) || 5 τρύχει |
τρίχει Papazotos (1987)

Many are the places of your glory, many also the punishments,
should I examine the multitude of my evils.
What could be more greatly desired than Christ? And what end? And who?
What words shall I offer you from my lips, o Word?
The memory of death terrifies me even more than death itself.
Look, my wretched soul, ...

A verse has been lifted out of the poem of Ouranos (v. 4, which corresponds to Ouranos’ verse 1). With regard to the rest of the composition:

- Verse 1 echoes Niketas of Klaudiopolis’ catanyctic alphabet (v. 34: Μὲν πολλὰ τῆς δόξης σου, ἀλλὰ καὶ τιμωρία), with re-adaptations.⁵⁸

55 <https://www.dbbe.ugent.be/types/4942>. The epigram was edited by T. Papazotos, ‘Τὸ κτηματολόγιο τῆς μονῆς Ἁγίου Διονυσίου τοῦ ἐν Ὀλύμπῳ. Χειρόγραφα καὶ παλαιῖτα τῆς Πιερίας’, *Μακεδονικά* 26 (1987) 16–50 (43).

56 Papazotos, ‘Τὸ κτηματολόγιο’, 43. The colophon is incomplete in its first part. The name of the scribe has not been preserved, while the date is clearly legible.

57 Papazotos, ‘Τὸ κτηματολόγιο’, 43.

58 Edition of Niketas’ alphabet in Anastasijewić, *Alphabete*, 491. The activity of Niketas, metropolitan of Klaudiopolis, can be dated to the tenth and eleventh centuries (PmbZ 25812: <https://pbw2016.kdl.kcl.ac.uk/person/155125/>. See also PmbZ 25816). His catanyctic alphabet consists of twenty-four stanzas of three political verses each.

- Verses 2 and 3 quote a catanyctic alphabet by Symeon Metaphrastes (respectively: v. 29: Ὅταν ἀναλογίσωμαι τῶν κακῶν μου τὰ πλήθη, and v. 38: Τί Χριστοῦ ποθεινότερον; ὦ πλάνης! ὦ μανίας!).⁵⁹
- Verse 5 perfectly reproduces a verse from the catanyctic alphabet by Kyriakos of Chonai (tenth c.), v. 23: Μνήμη θανάτου τρύχει με καὶ τοῦ θανάτου πλέον.⁶⁰

Here again we see the appropriation of pre-existing texts by one of their users. These poems were part of the believer's personal devotion, and were then interwoven to form a new product: a personal catanyctic prayer.

The nature of the catanyctic self makes Ouranos' poem a malleable text, which can be taken, modified and rewritten by its users. In this way, it becomes a personal product that fits into the history of the individual believer. The new transformed poem thus reflects the needs of its new author. Each user, by appropriating the text and reworking it, makes it his own creation, of which he is both protagonist and author.⁶¹

A personal poem for every penitent soul

The self of Ouranos' alphabet shows the traditional characteristics of the self of Byzantine catanyctic poetry. It is typological and therefore does not correspond to a specific individual: it is a penitent self before God. The representation of the 'I-voice' in Ouranos' alphabet oscillates between the unworthiness of a condemned sinner and the dignity of one whose redemption is still a possibility. In order to characterize this condition, the catanyctic self draws on catanyctic hymnography, patristic literature and the Scriptures. He presents himself as a man at the end of his life (vv. 16–18), who is afraid of the punishments that will follow his death. He begs for God's mercy: his feeling of guilt is great, but divine compassion is greater still (cf. vv. 43–5).

The result is a self-centred poem that does not offer specific biographical information about the historical figure of Ouranos, but becomes usable both by the individual believer and the entire Byzantine congregation. The reuse of Ouranos' alphabet in other poems of personal devotion demonstrates the malleable nature of its self, which allows this kind of text to be reused in different context and by different users according to personal need and necessities. Ouranos' alphabet is a personal poem, but it does not belong to Ouranos alone. It belongs to every penitent Byzantine soul.

59 PG 114.132. This alphabet presents a series of alphabetical distichs (48 in total) in political verses.

60 Ed. Lauxtermann, *Spring*, 101. The alphabet consists of twenty-four strophes of two lines each in political verse.

61 Given the malleable nature of catanyctic poems, their reuse was very frequent. For other examples see M. Lauxtermann, 'His, and not his: the poems of the late Gregory the Monk', in A. Pizzone (ed.) *The Author in Middle Byzantine Literature: modes, functions, and identities* (Berlin 2014), 77–86.

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