

Vasile Cătălin BOBB*

What if behind all things there is a story and not some metaphysical astray?

(Ioan Alexandru Tofan, *Ca prin oglindă, în ghicitură. Mici eseuri despre creștinism*, Galaxia Gutenberg, Târgu-Lăpuș, 2024, 212p.)

Keywords: Ioan Alexandru Tofan, itinerance, religious experience, story, metaphysics, Christianity

A certain misunderstanding may occur when one tries to understand such a concept as *itinerance*. Not because we can't hold its prime meaning (traveling or, better yet, walking), but only because it is not something we usually use in order to define a religious experience. Certainly, Saul was walking when the epiphany occurred but, to my mind, and for the history of western culture and religion, the epiphany as such becomes much more important than that of walking as such. Truth to be told – Tofan names it „spiritual itinerance” where „... the diversity – like in oriental fairytales -of expressions, characters and forms hides the unicity of transcendental reference, its irreducible and absolute character, where all the differences and multiple modulations are reabsorbed.” (Tofan 2019, 10) Now, it is true that the last part of the quoted proposition holds a strong metaphysical character (not to name it theological), but, using the words of converted Saul, Tofan only allures to it – „like in a mirror dimly”. Setting aside (only to postpone it) the infinite problem, so obviously present here, of „the one and the many”, let us come back to this concept of „itinerance” developed by Ioan Alexandru Tofan in „*The Inner Man. Andre Scrima and the Physiognomy of Spiritual Experience*”, because, in my reading, it defines his latest book „*Like in a Mirror Dimly. Small Essays on Christianity*.”

When Ioan Alexandru Tofan speaks about the physiognomy of spiritual experience (it is interesting to notice that Tofan prefers the term spiritual, not religious) we may wonder what kind of experiences he is speaking about? To use Tofan's words „a plural experience (...) describing the hypothesis of a delocalized sacred, fluid, dynamic which operates by an extraordinary power of seduction instead of the power of instituting or founding an objective truth”

* Vasile Cătălin Bobb, Associate Professor, Faculty of Letters, The North University Centre of Baia Mare, Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Email: vasilecatalinbobb@gmail.com.

(Tofan 2019, 11). Setting aside that the emphasis is on words such as „dynamic” „delocalize” „fluid” and not, as one should expect, on sacred, we may wonder again where this dynamism, fluidity or displacement is to be found? On, to use, again, Tofan words, „languages, gestures, places, rhythms and characters in so far as all these renders visible the overwhelming presence of the Other” (Tofan 2019, 17). It may seem that a sort of rupture between two axes is present here, where the first (let us call it the Sacred or the Other or, better yet, in Tofan`s words, „the transcendental axis”), establishes the second (let us call it languages, gestures, places and so on, or „the historical axis”). But, at strange at may appear, this is not the case with Tofan`s interpretation because „in the hypothesis that I assume in the meeting point of the two axes stands (...) the radical origin of experience where any `previous` falsifies it under a name which doesn't belong to it” (Tofan 2019, 21). Thus, coming back to the problem of „the one and the many”, for Tofan the two axes are one. And it is the „merit” of *spiritual experience* or *itinerance* to hold such a strong statement. I want to make, quoting Tofan, two last remarks before passing to *Like in a mirror dimly. Small essays on Christianity*: (1) „inscribing the strangeness of the heavens into the world produces a luxurious semiosis” (Tofan 2019, 99) where „the signs, specific gestures or words that articulate the spiritual experience must be interpreted from the perspective of a `realism` of transcendence that concretely inhabits the interiority of the world” (Tofan 2019, 196); (2) „the spiritual experience stands under the sign of apophatic anthropology (...) no matter what forms it takes, it is a form of immersion into the depths of man, *an inner itinerance* (...)” (Tofan 2019, 178, my undelaying)

To my mind, only assuming the melting point of axes where history merges with the realism of transcendence (or the heavens, as Tofan calls it) into the depths of man, *itinerance* becomes a valid epistemic operator, otherwise is just a word into the almost infinite sea of words. Not without a reason I introduced this (something that, for sure, Tofan will abhor it) phrase – valid epistemic operator. Only because into the world of spirit (and philosophy) we always need (don't we?) valid epistemic operators (and *itinerance* is one of them).

Having in mind the apophatic anthropology immersed into the luxuriant semiosis of the world we can read, more adequate, I think, *Like in a Mirror Dimly. Small Essays on Christianity* (because the luxuriant area of themes, subjects, characters of the book¹, as in a broken mirror, can easily be gathered, in order to glimpse the full imagine, by *itinerance*)

However, being absorbed by epistemic operators, I am not sure if I managed to fully show the main lines in which Tofan writes. A careful writing, crafted with patience, as if he doesn't want to disturb the things he is writing about. For instance, when Tofan writes about the „*Poorest of things. About the way of seeing of the simple ones*” (Tofan 2024, 54-58) one should aspect some decisive and, to a certain extent, some conclusive remarks. The „simple ones” deserve,

don't they, to be obliterated by some metaphysical explications. Let me be a bit clear: when for „the simple ones” the „wonder of creation speaks to them directly without the mediation of some intellectual formulation or a `speculative delay`” we should, as philosophers, introduce, for obvious reasons, an exhaustive metaphysical explication. Don't they deserve to see, more properly, the hidden truths of creation? But what if (and here stands the entire thesis, to my mind, of the book) „behind all things there is a story and not some metaphysical astray?” (Tofan 2024, 32) I must confess, I don't know, but I am willing, at least, to hear the story. And the story goes like this: it is about a truth that „never shows itself as such” (Tofan 2024, 17), and its manifestations can be conceived only as „longing and waiting, as well as a technique to educate the eyes in order to see, in the grey color of time that passes, the blue of eternity.” (Tofan 2024, 18). A truth that explains why „poets don't go mad, but mathematicians do” (Tofan 2024, 40). A truth that „knows” „that the perfection of the world is not to be found at the horizon, but into the warm light of twilight of the day that passed.” (Tofan 2024, 45) A truth that, as Steinhardt says, shows „trust in the other, courage, detachment, goodwill towards the afflicted ones, from which you cannot gain anything (sick, strangers, imprisoned), a certain sense of grandness, willing to forgive, despising the prudent and earners” (Tofan 2024, 48). A truth that „believes and laughs” (Tofan 2024, 52). A truth that, as Marin Tarangul says, „defends life with a poor broom” (Tofan 2024, 65). A truth that „knows” that „the world is, in its inner depths, fragile” (Tofan 2024, 87). A truth that manifests itself like a „light breeze in the evening” (Tofan 2024, 89). A truth that „knows” that „music can give voice to tears in a manner that theology can't” (Tofan 2024, 122). A truth that etc. etc. etc.²

I would like to end my attempt on Tofan's book with two remarks. (1) The first, a bit too theological for my taste, is the problem of *katechon* or of „the one who withholds.” Despite current (and established) interpretation (a historical figure, the imperium, the king, or the hero), Tofan holds that „the one who withholds” may be viewed „as a weak, fragile, invisible mechanism inscribed in the texture of everyday life. The unknown ones without plinths or chronicles.” (Tofan 2024, 197) And, for Tofan, the unknown ones are „those how doesn't pass carelessness besides the pain and misery of streets” or, as in Hasidism, the thirty-six hidden righteous ones. But, perhaps, tells Tofan, we might find another type of the „ones who withholds” or the „ones who gnaw the root of evil”. And in this peculiar typology Tofan names the dreamers, the poets, the bohemians, the losers and the nostalgic. (2) The second, if I am not mistaking, I think that Tofan assumes entirely the apophatic anthropology. An anthropology where the two axes (transcendental and historical) converge. I will name it, I do not know how adequately, a weak (fragile) anthropology where the foundation of it are not some acclaimed, undeniable and powerful truths,

but like in a blue breeze, a soft touch of the Other inscribed in the depths of man³.

¹ The book is composed from various articles written between 2021 – 2023 in the cultural review *Dilema veche*.

² I ask the reader to forgive the copious number of quotes, but when one is trying to catch the uncacheable or the truth of a story, one needs abundance.

³ See Edward Hopper. *Urban Loneliness* (pp., 95-99), *Spiritual Geographies (I): The Desert* (pp., 188-192) and *Spiritual Geographies (II): The City* (pp., 192-196).

References

- TOFAN, Ioan Alexandru. 2024. *Ca prin oglindă, în ghicitură. Mici eseuri despre creștinism*, Galaxia Gutenberg: Târgu-Lăpuș
- TOFAN, Ioan Alexandru. 2019. *Omul lăuntric. Andre Scrima și fizionomia experienței spirituale*, Humanitas: București.