

In My Solitude: Figurative Rationality and Axiological Inversion in Saints Barsanuphius and John of Gaza

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Abstract – The paper focuses on the relationship between the hermit and his cell, considered as a semantic operator acting on the monk's experience. The monk's discourse presents figurative transformations of the cell (e.g. into a cemetery or temple) and an axiological inversion between life and death; it constructs a topological equivalence between the cell and the monk's soul. By acting on the monk's experience, the cell allows him to re-categorize the *semiotics of his world*. The case study consists of writings about early monks and nuns, focusing in particular on Barsanuphius and John of Gaza (6th century AD).

Keywords: semantic operator – estrangement – figurative transformation – semantic inversion – semiotics of the world

1. Introduction

The relationship between the hermit and the space of the cell seems to have been a necessary element of the monk's pursuit of the divine from the very beginning of the monastic movement. As attested by religious discourse about seclusion, ascetic space paradoxically attempts «to translate this process of annulling space into topologies, spaces, places ... The spatial discourse of asceticism attempts to rearticulate the shared grammar of places so that they translate an ineffable dislocation of the sacred»¹. It is very interesting to explore the way in which the space of the cell gives rise to the effect described by Massimo Leone, as well as the relationship between ascetic discourse and the traces that ascetic experience leaves in its semantics. To this end, I will analyze the hermit's own discourse and discourses on hermits produced at the dawn of the anchorite movement to glean an insight into the semantic features that allow these monks to fill their days with meaning.

The research presented here is part of the project «NeMoSanct!», which has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement No 757314).

¹ M. Leone, *Semiotica dello spazio ascetico*, in «Humanitas», 68, 2013, 6, pp. 937-947, here p. 941.

2. The First Hermits

Examining the ancient testimonies about the first hermits and nuns, these early writings present certain features. Specifically, they tend to:

- invert the usual values attributed to life and death. An untroubled, pure soul simply awaits the end of life without further concerns. The primary function of the cell is thus to serve as a sort of tomb for secular life and its imperfections.
- transfer values from space to the soul. The space of the cell is a lens for the hermit's spiritual focus on God.
- provide a space for conflict, manifesting as temptations affecting the body such as lust, or the soul such as vainglory. Such temptations become tangible, embodied by demons, in such a way as to make the space into a battlefield. The spiritual war can be either won or lost. It is mistaken to affirm that hermits sought solitude to avoid temptations; on the contrary, the cell, solitude, and loneliness amplify human passions such as acedia, restlessness, and desperation. Spiritual athletes practiced asceticism specifically to test themselves. As Mother Syncletica has said: «For the more athletes make progresses, the more they are matched with stronger opponents»².

At the same time, the purpose of seclusion was actually to train ascetics to govern these conditions that often tested them severely, especially in the first phase of their trajectory of retreat as can be seen in the spiritual direction of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza.

Taking spiritual combat as our starting point, it is interesting to note the recommendations penned by Evagrius Ponticus in his *Treatise on the Practical life (Praktikos)*, dating back to the 4th century AD:

«You must not abandon the cell in the time of temptations, fashioning excuses seemingly reasonable. Rather, you must remain seated inside, exercise perseverance, and valiantly welcome all attackers, especially the demon of acedia, who is the most oppressive of all but leaves the soul proven to the highest degree. Fleeing and circumventing such struggles teaches the mind to be unskilled, cowardly, and evasive»³.

According to Evagrius, the demon of acedia, also known as the noon-day demon,

² Pseudo-Athanasius, *The Life and Regimen of the Blessed and Holy Syncletica. Part Two: A Study of the Life*, ed. by M. Schaffer, Eugene, Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005, p. 148.

³ R.E. Sinkewicz (ed.), *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 102.

«... compels the monk to look constantly towards the windows, to jump out of the cell, to watch the sun to see how far it is from the ninth hour [3 p.m.], to look this way and that lest one of the brothers [has come]»⁴.

This short passage illustrates an important function of the cell: it is an arena for spiritual battles against the demons of temptation. These figurative, anthropomorphic actors embody non-figurative *logismoi*, a Greek word that can be translated as «calculating thoughts» that present obstacles in the elevation of the soul. Evagrius finds this notion in Origen of Alexandria, who in turn borrows it from Neoplatonic philosophy. Framed in this way, it has been grafted forever onto the monk's *Weltanschauung*. The spiritual fight is an anthropomorphization of the monks' interior struggle against the passions, that is, their efforts to control their impulses and thereby achieve a state of divine quiet.

As for the move to invert life and death, early collections of sayings by the Desert Fathers (*apophthegmata*) and their biographies, such as Palladius' *Historia Lausiaca*, reveal the environment in which early monks took refuge in order to pursue perfection and struggle against temptations. The *lavra* could be a hut or a space carved out of rock. It usually consisted of two rooms and a niche, called a «window», used to hold icons. It was surrounded by a wall, thus allowing the hermits to grow a garden. The encircling wall protected cells and monasteries from nomads and, in many cases, there was a tower used as a refuge⁵.

The first ascetics in the Egyptian deserts were mainly men, but female anchorites very often joined them. Female monasteries were located near cities so as to prevent possible violence against them. The writings about these ascetics confirm the above-mentioned themes of spiritual combat and the inversion of life and death. One such example is *Amma*⁶ Sara of Egypt. Like many examples of Mediterranean architecture, Sara's house had a flat roof that served as a terrace:

«They also said of her that the same demon of lust was once attacking her menacingly, and tempting her with vain thought of the world. But she kept fearing God in her soul and maintained the rigor of her fasting. And once when she climbed up on the roof to pray, the spirit of lust appeared to her in a bodily form and said to her: 'You have beaten me, Sarah'. But she replied: 'It is not I who have beaten you, but my Lord the Christ'»⁷.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 99.

⁵ L. Cremaschi (ed.), *Deti e fatti delle donne del deserto*, Magnano, Edizioni Qiqajon, 2018, p. 145.

⁶ *Amma* is the word for 'Mother' used by the Desert Fathers, corresponding to the male term *Abba*.

⁷ O. Chadwick (ed.), *Western Asceticism*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1958, p. 63.

Amma Sarah thus encountered the demon of lust on a terrace like a former lover or an old adversary, and they spoke about their past battles. Other sayings provide further details about her hut: «They said of Abbess Sarah of blessed memory, that for sixty years she lived on the bank of a river, and never looked down to see the water»⁸. The houses near the Nile could have been tombs of the pagan era, re-used by the hermits. According to the pagan religion, the tombs were designed as homes to house the soul in the afterlife⁹. Imitating Anthony the Great, monks and nuns such as Amma Alexandra chose these tombs as a refuge. When asked by Palladius about her life, Amma Alexandra explained how she lived, fighting against acedia:

«I pray every hour from dawn to the ninth hour while spinning linen; the remaining hours I go over the holy patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and martyrs in my mind; then, when I have eaten my bread, I pass the remaining hours in perseverance, awaiting my end with gentle hope»¹⁰.

In the passage quoted here, the focus is on the cell as a ‘spiritual lens’ allowing the nun to concentrate on her thoughts.

As with many nuns and monks, Alexandra spent her time spinning linen, making rope, and weaving baskets. Monks also worked in the fields during the harvest. Cloistered life was not strict: hermits met in the Church for liturgy, were able to receive visits in the afternoon, and went on pilgrimages. Cloistered life was not an end in itself. In fact, as described by Pseudo-Basiliius in *Ascetic Constitutions*, for the perfect monk the body itself constitutes the cell and refuge for the soul. Indeed, a monk can retreat into his own thoughts even when he is home alone, and can remain vigilant and focused on God even in the public square¹¹. As Amma Syncletica stated:

«Many people have found salvation in a city while imagining the condition of a desert. And many, though on a mountain, have been lost by living the life of townspeople. It is possible for one who is in a group to be alone in thought, and for one who is alone to live mentally with a crowd»¹².

This passage shows how the values associated with the cell are transferred to the individual: if this transfer takes place correctly, it is not important whether or not the nun lives in isolation, otherwise the an-

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 87.

⁹ L. Cremaschi (ed.), *Deti e fatti delle donne del deserto*, p. 139.

¹⁰ J. Wortley (ed.), *Palladius of Aspuna. The Lausiac History*, Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 2015, pp. 14-15.

¹¹ L. Cremaschi (ed.), *Deti e fatti delle donne del deserto*, p. 142.

¹² Pseudo-Athanasius of Alexandria, *The Life and Regimen of the Blessed and Holy Syncletica*, p. 24.

chorite would not find salvation in the desert. In synthesis, the cell acts as a *semantic operator* that performs different functions in terms of competence and performance and syntagmatically links them. In the case of the nun's competence, the *lavra* modifies this element from a modal point of view: it prevents her from seeing or perceiving and allows the nun to acquire spiritual vision instead. As noted above, Amma Sara does not look out at the outside world; the real 'window' is the niche holding the icons. Furthermore, the cell carries out a semantic inversion of valorization of euphoria vs. dysphoria usually equated by culture with the opposition life vs. death. Finally, the *lavra* serves to take the *afferent values*¹³ (silence, peace) relative to spiritual concentration (*focusing*) and semantically transfer them from external space to the internal space of the body.

Having provided the monk with spiritual competence, the *lavra* becomes the space of performance in form of spiritual combat. In terms of narrative semiotics, it is a *utopic* space, «a place where the human doing surmounts the permanence of being, a place of performances»¹⁴. In this regard, Greimas observes that the performance of the hero in mythical tales is located outside the world of everyday experience: such performance is set in celestial or underwater spaces. In a similar way, the space of the cell narcotizes the ordinary features of the nun's experience.

3. Barsanuphius and John of Gaza

I will now present the case of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza (6th century AD). These hermits lived in complete solitude in a small cell outside the coenobium of Abba Seridus, in Palestine. Despite their state of reclusion, they were both spiritual directors and communicated with their brothers exclusively in writing. Their letters, collected by their disciples, represent a classic of spiritual literature. Barsanuphius and John speak very little about themselves and their hermitic experience. Nevertheless, their rare descriptions provide precious insight into the meaning of reclusion and, more generally, monastic life in a cell.

¹³ Regarding the distinction between inherent and afferent semantic values (*semes*), see F. Rastier, *Meaning and Textuality*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1997.

¹⁴ A.J. Greimas - J. Courtés, *Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1982, p. 181.

Below is a list of the main features conveyed by Barsanuphius' letters:

- the inversion of the value between life and death: the monk's self-annihilation allows for the manifestation of God. Furthermore, the analogy between the cell and the soul allows the monk to establish communion, a decisive step in the quest for perfection.
- estrangement (*xeniteia*). As a meaning effect, I have described estrangement as the subject's refusal to accept the action program of an anti-sender manipulator whose values are not shared by the subject¹⁵. This behavior can be observed in many different cases by adopting an ethnosemiotic point of view: I have observed it in psychiatric patients who do not share the program imposed by doctors; Edmund Husserl also writes about a form of self-estrangement from the past subject in that we no longer have the awareness of being a subject intentionally projected towards the future¹⁶.
- intertextuality and polyphony. When writing, the monk continuously bases the form of his life on the scripture. In so doing, he gives meaning to his everyday life in the cell. Barsanuphius conveys this meaning in his role as spiritual director, thereby producing meaning for directed souls who cannot find or have lost it, e.g. because of disease, solitude, pain and so on¹⁷. For example, many of Barsanuphius' letters are addressed to sick brothers: in these texts, everyday experience is taken up as a plane that manifests the meaning of the holy scriptures.
- in monastic language, the lexeme «cell» acquires a very special semantic value. It is part of a technical language that monks use to associate meaning with their experience: a *metalanguage*. Consequently, it is possible to reconstruct their experience by interpreting the semantic structure of their writings.

Beginning from the semantic value associated with the cell, in *Letter 74*, while suggesting that a sick brother rest, Barsanuphius writes:

«Believe me, brothers, [when I say] that vainglory has gained control over me. Never have I in sickness laid down to rest or put down my handiwork; and yet great illnesses have

¹⁵ F. Galofaro, *Dopo Gerico: i nuovi spazi della psichiatria*, Bologna, Esculapio, 2015, p. 64.

¹⁶ E. Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*, in *Husserliana*, L'Aia, Martinus Nijhoff, 1959, VI.

¹⁷ A semiotic analysis I carried out in relation to epistolary spiritual direction can be found in F. Galofaro, *La scrittura come laboratorio mistico: le lettere di Padre Pio ai suoi direttori spirituali*, in J. Ponso - F. Galofaro (eds.), *Autobiografie spirituali*, Roma, Aracne, 2021, pp. 135-170.

come to me. Recently vainglory has been tricky, ever since I have entered its cell, and it does not allow illness to come to me»¹⁸.

Worth noting is the interesting expression «to enter the cell of vainglory». Barsanuphius uses this phrase to express that he penetrated the intimate structure of vainglory's tricks. This element demonstrates the deep relationship between the experience of the monk and his technical language. The monk's technical language is not only the manifesting plane of his unique experience, the traces of which can be found in its semantic structures¹⁹; the meanings associated with the anchorite's cell become categories that he projects onto his everyday life in order to re-categorize it, consequently modifying the semiotics of his world.

Letters 141-142 are related to the theme of death. Barsanuphius' cell is figuratively transformed into a cemetery; in turn, John the Prophet explains:

«This is because he has found rest from all the passions there. For he has died completely to sin, and his cell, wherein he is enclosed as if in a tomb for the sake of Jesus' name, is the place of rest, where neither demon nor the devil, the chief of demons, treads. Indeed, it has become a sanctuary inasmuch as it contains the dwelling-place of God»²⁰.

The cell is simultaneously a tomb in which to bury oneself and a sanctuary of God. The positive value granted to death is here associated with a classic mystical theme: self-annihilation, aimed at making room for God. Hence the equivalence between the tomb and the sanctuary becomes understandable. The semantic inversion of life and death is also related to the remembrance of death (called *meditatio mortis* in Latin monasticism), a technique used by hermits to abandon material concerns:

«The remembrance of death amongst those in the midst of society gives birth to distress and frivolity, and even more – to despondency. But amongst those who are free from noise it produces the putting aside of cares, and constant prayer and guarding of the mind. But these same virtues both produce the remembrance of death and are also produced by it»²¹.

¹⁸ Barsanuphius and John, *Letters*, ed. and trans. by J. Chryssavgis, 2 vols., Washington DC, The Catholic University of America Press, 2006, I, p. 100.

¹⁹ In a similar way, infants learn how to use language as they experience the world by projecting it on their environment and thereby categorizing their surroundings. For a discussion of the semiotics of the natural world, see A.J. Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*, R. Schleifer (ed.), Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1983.

²⁰ Barsanuphius and John, *Letters*, I, p. 165.

²¹ J. Climacus, *The Ladder of the Divine Ascent*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1959, p. 110.

Barsanuphius' *Letter 55* introduces another important function of the cell: this space allows its inhabitant to practice *xeniteia*, i.e. the experience of the stranger: the awareness of being a guest, a migrant. Responding to an Egyptian pilgrim who had written to him in Coptic asking to meet him in person, Barsanuphius wrote (in Greek):

«If I am your father as you write, I give you a commandment not to bother me about meeting. For I do not show favoritism to anyone in my life. If I open up for you, then I should open up for all; and if I do not open up for you, nor do I open up for anyone else»²².

The estrangement is based on a verse from the Bible: «Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee» (Genesis 12, 1, King James version). This is only one example of the kind of polyphonic writing that characterizes religious discourse in general.

To return to the focus of this section, Barsanuphius' letters allows us to delve more deeply into the relationship between the cell, as a semantic operator, and experience. In association with holy writings, the inversion of life and death in the form of the *meditatio mortis* is a technique that serves to transform the monk's self and his experience (estrangement). The cell itself thus provides the monk with a new set of categories which he then projects onto his world to re-interpret it.

4. Conclusion: The Cell as a Semantic Operator

As a semantic operator, the cell performs a series of semantic inversions in reference to the value that the secular world ordinarily associates with a series of categorical oppositions. The following homology summarizes the effect of this operation:

Dysphoric : Euphoric = Passion : Quiet = Life : Death = Human : Divine = World : Heaven = Friend : Stranger

Each opposition gives birth to a coherent *isotopy* of the monk's discourse, i.e. a coherent level of reading of the text arising from the dissemination of an abstract theme or concrete figure. As a consequence, the monk's writing can be considered a case of the *figurative rationality* that characterizes religious discourse: «it happens sometimes that several figurative isotopies correspond to one single thematic isotopy. The Gospel parables, related as they are to a common theme, are a good illustration of

²² Barsanuphius and John, *Letters*, I, p. 68.

the point»²³. For example, in Matthew 13 the *kingdom of heaven* is associated with the figures of «a man who sowed good seed in his field»; «a mustard seed»; «the yeast»; «a treasure hidden in a field», and so on. In the anchorite's discourse, the cell becomes a tomb, a battlefield, or a space identified with heaven. Each figurative transformation corresponds to a re-functionalization of the cell.

These semantic inversions are the traces, left in the monk's language, of the way in which the cell modifies the recluse's everyday experience (estrangement) beginning from the move to reduce his worldly perception so as to acquire spiritual sight. The monk recategorizes the world of life through the meanings associated with the cell, thus modifying the semiotics of his world²⁴. According to Greimas' hypothesis, the world of our experience is a semiotic system whose figures and relations, sedimented in the semantics of language, express meanings associated with them by culture²⁵. The cell proves this hypothesis in various ways, since the association in question is modified by operating on the ordinary experience of the world to suspend or modify it. In this way, the cell becomes a sort of ambivalent space, a gate between the earthly world and heaven capable of subverting the human world and its values in order to reach the divine.

²³ A.J. Greimas - J. Courtés, *Semiotics and Language*, p. 164.

²⁴ Regarding the semiotic relationship between figures, themes, and the semiotic of the world in religious discourse, see P. Bertetti, *Lo schermo dell'apparire*, Bologna, Esculapio, 2013, pp. 100-109.

²⁵ A.J. Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*, pp. 71-73.

