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## **POETRY AS A “SANCTUARY” AMIDST BARBED WIRE: THE DIALOGUE OF SYMBOLS**

**Keywords:** *prison-poetry; literary-hermeneutics; sites-of-memory; cultural-memory; trauma; prisoners-of-conscience*

**Abstract:** *With the 1990s, after the communist regime collapsed in Romania, the reading public could see the rapidly increasing publication of poetry composed by former prisoners of conscience. Still, to this day, such works have remained a somewhat peripheral concern of literary critics and the society alike. These writings, nevertheless, have a lot to offer in terms of meanings, beyond the aesthetic plane, in gaining further insight into the human condition and creativity amid traumatic circumstances. One may find studies about Romanian prison poetry, on the one hand, describing the abusive political power as well as victims’ resistance to it and, on the other, identifying elements of collective memories transmitted through literary discourse. However, the unique ways in which these texts have been able to help their authors maintain their moral values and identity have not undergone a thorough exploration. This article aims to offer a glimpse into this very issue and emphasise its relevance to literary, memory and trauma studies. This brief analysis hermeneutically approaches the poetry created by Bishop Ioan Ploscaru during his ideologically-motivated incarceration. More specifically, it focuses on how, amid the dynamics between the poetic act and the prisoner’s mental state, his “rhymed reflections” gain the qualities of a ‘memory sanctuary’. This notion derives from that of symbolic “sites of memory” and relates to processes of remembering, contemplating and seeking protection. In their original, unwritten state, Ioan Ploscaru’s poems - later featured in the volume *Cruci de gratii* (Crosses of Prison Grates) - evoke an inner space of representation, where detention experiences get invested with new meanings. In the circumstances of life-threatening abuses, these verses illustrate how the mental (re)composing of personal poems works towards achieving the survival of conscience.*

### **Approaching Ioan Ploscaru’s poems**

This article addresses psychologically relevant aspects of how a victim of state-sanctioned repression attempts to resist the impact of detention abuse using the means of literature. The chosen example refers to the prison poetry created by Uniate Bishop Ioan Ploscaru. He was a prisoner of conscience during the communist campaigns of repression between 1948 and 1964, which led to mass detentions in postwar Romania. The approach to his texts will be a hermeneutic one, and the symbols will be related to aspects of personal memory and experience. In the Bishop’s poems, collected in a volume under the title *Cruci de gratii* (*Crosses of Prison Grates*), there are conflicting stances and attitudes towards life and death, which often

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manifest through figurative imagery. Their meanings appear to be, however, in a sort of dialogue, one adding to another, like sequences of replies, to create a more complex and psychologically significant picture of personal life in prison. Considering the limited scope of this study, it will only address the competing meanings ascribed to a few key-symbols found in the Bishop's poetry, by relating them to each other, to the poetic endeavour, as well as to the biographical context of its occurrence.

In order for the analysis to proceed unimpeded by issues of literary convention, it will regard the poetic self as a discursive projection of the real-life author's conscience. While bearing in mind the necessary disjunction between the author and the poetic speaker, the two nevertheless appear in a continuum of meaning, value expression and worldview. One reason for not adopting a binary perspective in this respect is that these poems were not originally designed to serve an aesthetic purpose but to function as sincere self-expression meant to address divinity. So, there seems to be no artificial creation of different voices, stances or personalities to motivate the use of this convention, unless when dealing with specific poems where the author would give some hints in this respect. Generally speaking, the reason is that his poems admittedly constitute "rhymed reflections" and are mostly dedicated to the transcendent: "These lines were a sigh, a cry, an invocation or act of worship addressed to God! . . . I was speaking to heaven . . . I reflected upon the mysteries of faith, experiencing wonderful moments." (Ploscaru 204).<sup>1</sup> The fact that these poems generally constitute a personal act of address lessens the gap between the planes of literary and non-literary expression of the same self. In this study, the terms 'conscience,' 'author,' and 'self' will be used interchangeably to designate the authorial mind in its process of expressing personal perceptions, feelings, memories, ideas and attitudes through poetic discourse, during prison experience.

### **Sketching the context**

A few biographical aspects which are relevant for contextualising this set of poems need a brief mention, before proceeding to the analysis of symbols. It is essential to bear in mind that Ioan Ploscaru was arrested and detained by communist authorities after having been ordained Bishop of Lugoj, in the context of the regime's crackdown on the Romanian Uniate Church in 1948. His political incarceration spanned about 15 years, in two instances, the first between 1949 and 1955, and the second between 1956 and 1964 for supposed "betrayal of the country and plotting against the social order" (Andrei 5), which was a general verdict against politically inconvenient citizens.

During his detention, Bishop Ploscaru composed poetry, just like many other prisoners of conscience in that era, the most notable of which being Radu Gyr, Nichifor Crainic and Andrei Ciurunga. However, given the author's rather contemplative and introverted personality, he did not spread his "rhymed reflections"

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes from the Bishop's volume of poetry *Cruci de gratii* (Crosses of Prison Grates), under the pen name Ioan Andrei, and from his memoir *Lanțuri și teroare: drama Bisericii în închisorile comuniste* (Chains and Terror: The Drama of the Church in Communist Prisons) are my translations from the original Romanian texts.

among inmates, as the better-known prison poets did. Instead, he regarded his literary endeavour as a personal expression of prayer and rumination on life, thereby excluding the possibility of addressing readers or listeners. Besides, reciting the poems was, in itself, dangerous, considering the severe punishments for talking, especially on forbidden topics such as religion.

### **The need for a poetic “sanctuary”**

In the traumatising environment of politically-motivated detention, Bishop Ioan Ploscaru’s poetic discourse expresses mostly two main, dividing, tendencies impacting psychological well-being, through the encouragement of either an attitude of endurance or resignation. The prevalence of one set over the other depends on how well, profoundly and persistently the mind nurtures its will to live, even in environments of suffering. *Crosses of Prison Grates* offers the chance of exploring one of the many ways in which a political prisoner can try, through the poetic act, to keep the conscience essentially unaltered by the suffering of detention. In other words, the question would be: Can personal poetry aid in the persistence of moral identity, which underscores one’s view and way of life, while facing political repression? If so, then how? These are crucial issues since the answer practically shows whether one can avoid moral and spiritual impairment. The outcome, in turn, can show if socially helpless victims can, through artistic means, counter a totalitarian project of identity levelling. In this regard, the (re)creation of poems seems to form an internal, symbolic space that lessens the traumatic impact of this prison experience.

The poems draw on elements retained in Christian cultural memory and on ‘imprints’ of personal experience, mostly of detention. Besides, through mental re-enunciation, these elements become part of personal memory, just like the symbolic space they conjure through their reenactment. The verses thus become a *lieu de memoire*, in the French historian Pierre Nora’s terms. Based on a “will to remember” (Nora 19), they are “bound intimately with life and death, time and eternity; enveloped in a Möbius strip of the collective and the individual, the sacred and the profane . . .” (Nora 19). It is in such manner that the poems become a personal site of memory, in the sense that the elements of cultural memory gain individual expression and are reactivated precisely in an intimate, personal setting of sufferance. The nature of these sites of memory is purely symbolic, since, in their initial stages, they have no written form and no oral expression either, given the restrictive prison environment. Likewise, they have a functional property side, due to their role of psychological nourishing in traumatising contexts. It is especially so in terms of maintaining moral identity unaltered in the face of abuse. Since the prison landscape appears to impose itself, to the degree of obsession, on the prisoner’s mental “storage” of images and accompanying feelings, these *lieux de memoire* belong to those of the “dominated” kind (Nora 23). These compensatory sites of memory, characteristic of the author’s forbidden religious identity, hence, need to gain dominance over his “inscape,” to use Gerard Manley Hopkins’ well-known concept.

The faculty of memory works to keep alive the verses as well as the representations they evoke, continuing, in effect, the process of consolidating identity and, thereby, maintaining a positive psychological cycle. However, personal memory

alone may lack the appropriate means to achieve it without the help of cultural memory, as a repository of fundamental values and archetypal representations. There is the characteristic of a culturally assimilated mental landscape of metaphorical “truth,” which underpins figurative thought concerning concrete, individual existence. It is here that “cultural memory” comes into play, with its distinct set of properties, as characterised by the German culture theorist Jan Assmann, who has advanced the concept: “Distance from the everyday (transcendence) marks its temporal horizon. Cultural memory has its fixed point; its horizon does not change with the passing of time. These fixed points are fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance)” (Assmann & Czaplicka 129). By shaping an internal, symbolic space of memory interpretation, which draws upon stored experiences, ideas and as well as ahistorical representations, the author provides himself with a constant and productive interpretive “lens” which he applies to the realities encountered in detention, often overwhelming in their negative emotional influence.

The poet’s self-expression relies on fundamental representations, which are fragments of assimilated cultural memory and involve religious thought. In particular, such recollection implies not only remembrance but also the re-assembling of figurative images into an “island of time” (Assmann & Czaplicka 129), with the connotation of “temporality suspended from time” (idem). Then, the mechanisms of reason and imagination intervene to reshape and blend symbolic conceptions with physical perceptions to help the conscience better cope with the traumatic realities in which it finds itself. Though these images seem divergent, in *Crosses of Prison Gates*, they tend to reach common ground through semantic interaction. Now follows a brief hermeneutic analysis of the moral and spiritual strengthening process which plays out in Bishop Ploscaru’s poetry.

If the negative depictions that bespeak of hunger, cold, captivity and probability of death dominate the mind, then it would only be natural to give in to depression, mental exhaustion and suicidal proclivities. However, the alternative of “soothing” oblivion does not seem a plausible solution. The reason is that the prison landscape is constant and, in fact, the only real space available, while reverie is merely a fleeting state of mind, and a vulnerable one at that. The impact of the inevitable return from dreaming to perceiving the facts can further deepen the existing effects of trauma. Such is the case with scenes of the imagination which fail to properly connect with the outside world and fail to convincingly claim rational validity, coherence and relevance to a reliable worldview.

The caveats of escapist approaches are, in a way, avoided by symbolic explanations of the author’s imprisonment. Thereby, visible elements of the real become pieces of a larger picture, where metaphorical “truth” adds to the understanding of physical surroundings. It is an attempt, intentional or not, to create a unitary and acceptable perspective that reconciles personal faith with impersonal fact. Otherwise, alienation and desperation are likely to ensue.

## **Living in chains**

Symbols of chains, iron bars and the like are present throughout this set of poems. At a basic level, they stand for captivity, and an unjust one, at that. In this interpretive frame of thought, chains act to immutably bind the prisoner to a slow process of becoming drained of life, which does not entail only the devoiding of being but also of meaning. There arises a feeling of stasis which falls outside of reason, outside of a coherent causal pattern, since such a form of incarceration has no reasonable justification in the first place. The principle of justice is turned upside-down, given that the innocent end up punished, and the morally degraded are given free rein to abuse their victims.

Consequently, the chains which the author describes seem all the more shocking and absurd. However, alongside the “crosses” of grates, they remind one of the passions of Jesus (See Andrei 76-78). In this context, the endurance of such harsh and unjust sentences equates to bearing a meaningful and significant burden. Hence the “crosses”, which stand for accepting not only captivity but a responsibility towards the collective as well. This shift in meaning points to the will of representing and testifying to the suffering of the Bishop’s Catholic community, which, in a sense, likens the ordeals of incarceration to Christ’s forbearing collective sins for the world. From a moral perspective, the two cases exemplify the persecution of a freely chosen spiritual belief, caused by oppressive rulers’ desire to secure or expand their control. In this sense, chains and shackles are used to deprive representatives of alternative belief systems of their symbolic power and influence on the public conscience, as well as of the means to survive in terms of cultural and moral identity.

The references to Christ bring about another connotation to the symbol of chains: The poet’s willingness to keep God as the master. This stance, in turn, bypasses the condition of physical enslavement by an atheistic regime to that of mental self-commitment to the divine will, as conceived of in Biblical narrative. This latter form of freely-chosen “enslavement” nevertheless stands in stark contrast to the first, and from multiple angles, at that. One is the imposition of captivity from the outside world versus the personal choice for submission in the moral sense. The chains are precisely meant to act as a punitive consequence of this latter attitude. Bishop Ploscaru’s religious activity and clergy status are the reasons for his imprisonment in the first place. Another way of contrasting the two types of enslavement has to do with their different causes and purposes. The first is the decision of a ruling group to punish ideological and social incompatibility with a politically desired identity. The second, however, stems from the individual and is an offering to the divine, in the Christian worldview. It signifies an act of self-sacrifice serving a goal which does not encroach upon others. From this standpoint, conforming with the requirements of faith and conduct put forth in the gospels is considered to ensure the soul’s liberation after death. Such an outcome would thus be a reward for intellectual and moral self-control. However, where does the actual imprisonment fit into this moral framework? The inner self-bounding to religion amounts to a form of freedom of thought in the context of ideologically motivated detention.

The coercive and prohibiting reality begins to be reframed and integrated within the author’s religious view on life. More specifically, the poet interprets his

chains as a challenge to overcome. From this vantage point, they gain the connotation of painful and binding reminders of sin. In other words, the prison, with its “crosses” of grates, is but a small piece in the more significant “puzzle” of existence, whereby the transcendent determines people to remember, repent and suffer for past wrongdoings.

Therefore, this is a condition brought about to show that the human self is bound to sinfulness. Although it has been carried on, in time, it could still be “redeemed” in the end: “as soon as the pillars of life break,/[I am] freed all at once from suffering and sins,/twice liberated: from prisons and body//. . . wearing the porphyry of blood as tunics/and as precious trophies - iron cuffs” (Andrei 39). Then, it follows that even unjust incarceration may be a context where Christian worshippers can prove their faith and obey religious precepts while suffering for their sins so that they can become “unshackled” upon death. Hence the instruments which denote captivity become a sort of necessary evil on the path of becoming fundamentally “liberated,” even from the “bodily prison”.

### **Two sides of the tomb**

Another recurring image is that of the sepulchre, to which the author likens his prison cell. (Andrei 17) In this respect, it carries both a spatial and temporal meaning. The isolation from the world, from social life and from the perception of the passage of time in society is akin to “living death.” Like a rotting corpse, the prisoner lies amid the decay and becomes both subject and object of oblivion. He is bound to slowly forget about the world, while the world is also bound to forget about his existence: “The light’s still inert and, never flickering,/like a Sphinx all frozen in riddles,/with day always night and night always day,/it has taken my existence out of time” (Andrei 19). The author feels he has been taken away, into a place outside society and even outside time itself. In particular, it is solitary confinement that inspires such an interpretation, since his perceptions of time and space cannot reach beyond the prison.

Moreover, the constant solitude inside the dark cell, amid stale and musty air, evokes a sepulchral atmosphere (Andrei 18). However, deeper connotations underscore these rather superficial impressions. One meaning refers to the destination of the cell, which is meant to ensure the disappearance of the prisoner - his physical cessation. As a consequence, considering the prison conditions involved, it constitutes a catalyser of death. Furthermore, the daunting emptiness suggests the hollowness of a corpse, the departing of the soul. Therefore, the permanent states of barrenness, stillness and silence, specific to isolation cells, create the impression of paralysis and also suggest death.

A pronounced feeling of nothingness arises, both in terms of possession and existence. However, it seems to prompt the mind to create compensatory images bearing meaning and purpose. Hence, this negative view of the tomb receives the reply of another, which reinvents the first in a positive light: “. . . when the Lord will pass judgement,/I shall leave the grave/as a slave to Him/and to the Unblemished Heart” (Andrei 57). The perspective of hope for the possibility of liberation and fulfilment gains significant expression here. The sense of prolonged and eventually fatal

sufferance becomes part of a scenario of purging sins. In this frame of ideas, passing away is assimilated to redemptive martyrdom, based on the merit of persevering in faith and anticipating heavenly acknowledgement to access “eternal life.” So, the tomb is conceived anew, from a place of ending to a place of beginning. Cultural memory provides the theme of resurrection as an integrative, metaphorical pattern for illustrating personal existence in the face of inescapable trauma.

Furthermore, the poetic conscience seems not only to accept the perspective of death but to ascribe himself spiritual power over it as well. In particular, he makes reference to “palm leaves,” because, in Christian conceptions: “. . . the palm was connected with martyrdom . . . and was used to decorate grave markers . . . as a sign of the triumphal death of the martyr . . . it usually stands for paradise, and Christ is frequently portrayed amid palms in heaven.” (Marthaler 813) His repeated reference and association to those tortured or killed for their faith in positive spiritual powers, both past and present, symbolically reactivates the image of the sacrifice of Christ, considered as an ultimate triumph of life over death. This idea emphasises the fact that moral values and beliefs, once they become deeply-rooted in one’s mind, are beyond the reach of physical coercion.

### **The cross, from different angles**

The cross is a multifaceted symbol repeatedly mentioned in these prayer-poems. The Bishop ascribes a Christian interpretation to the intersecting iron bars which cover the window of his cell, referring to them as “crosses.” Thereby, they become triggers for keeping religious faith alive in the prisoner’s memory, bearing in mind that they traditionally designate religious faith (See Hall 2). Still, one might dismiss this as overinterpreting an otherwise banal object. The author, nevertheless, creates such a metaphor in an intentional, self-reminding manner.

These intersecting iron bars, moreover, point to the primary, concrete, usage of crosses as tools of punishment, drawing on their Biblical depictions. For Christians, the cross is, fundamentally, “one of the Instruments of the Passion.” (Hall 2) Thus, the five crosses from the isolation cell come to represent the ostracisation from freedom and society in the case of a Christian adherent. They are a constant presence, seemingly inescapable and painful reminders of the Bishop’s punishment for his religious identity. Also, they materialise a physical sign of prohibition against the spiritual contemplation of heaven: “My grates, in a row, form five crosses,/a cross for each of the senses;/are the weak body and feeble soul,/Lord, able to forbear the sixth?” (Andrei 20). So, the grates are to forcibly “bind” the prisoner to primary, survival concerns and, thereby, to obscure spiritual rumination.

At the same time, the crosses of grates bring back to mind the example of Jesus redemptively bearing the sins of humankind, thereby accepting self-sacrifice for the sake of a higher, collective, good. Here emerges a similar ideal, though in a lesser, personal, sense. The impression of permanence which these intersecting iron grates give resemble the archetypal cross of the passion of Jesus. However, a related meaning of these “crosses,” indicates religious belonging, as they are shapes also used as grave markers. The conveyed meaning is that of persistent identity, beyond fleeting, earthly

existence. Furthermore, they are meant to communicate the presence of Christ as master and protector for the souls of the deceased (See Hall 2).

Since the ordeals of imprisonment are unavoidable, the author attempts to symbolically recreate his experience, in order to save the remainder of his mental and physical resources and to better cope with the effects of trauma. Under the conditions of prolonged and severe deprivation and exposure to sordid surroundings, the author accepts this suffering, as there is no real alternative. At the same time, he adds a sense of purpose to this acceptance, by drawing on the scene of Jesus climbing Calvary while being forced to bear his wooden cross (See Andrei 44). The authorial conscience, presumably, offers itself a prominent example to follow, in reactivating an attitude of spiritual perseverance and endurance.

### **Instances of the heart**

The heart, expressed as a defining, inner space, appears in different forms throughout *Crosses of Prison Gates*. The most common is that of a vital organ which feels as if bleeding (See Andrei 37). It thus stands for the “place” where suffering accumulates, once it has deeply sunken into the fibres of being, anticipating demise. The internalisation of abuse appears to reach the most deeply felt part of consciousness. However, beyond the basic understanding of this image, the heart is “reconstructed” in a different, positive, light, as it becomes a “temple.” It thus interestingly contrasts with its first depiction, as it changes to a non-biological structure of being, in order to shelter religious thought, feeling and attitude.

So, the ardour of religious worship takes the place of the blood “spilt” through violent persecution: “May my heart be a holy temple,/animated even while in slumber, in torment or happiness,/each beating - a pledge/and sacrifice amidst flames of love” (Andrei 46). In this transfigured core of being, a sort of sacred “flame” keeps rising towards the sky, to express the ambition of reaching divinity through an arduous process of self-sacrifice. Though this representation of the heart as the core of religious ardour is not new (See Hall 128), the structuring of it as a temple around a sacrificial fire is an intricate metaphorical image. This inner burning surfaces in two different, yet convergent, interpretations that the author puts forth. The first one implies suffering as accepted “cleansing” of sins, which gradually envelops the whole being, while the second points to the fostering of an intense, spiritual experience. However, this set of detention poems, in general, reveal that the ardour is somewhat tempered, because of the disheartening prison landscape and the understanding of how crucial inner balance is for maintaining sanity.

Besides these representations of the human heart, Bishop Ploscaru adds another, which he attributes to an instance of Christian divinity, namely the Virgin Mary, as source of heavenly mercy: “And, at the Final judgment,/may she be questioned, instead of me,/since, both in transient and heavenly destinies,/I belong to her warm heart.” (Andrei 17). There is a shift in meaning from the old symbol of the “sacred heart” of Christ, which “has been an object of devotion since the Middle Ages . . .” (Hall 128). It is thus within the scope of a metaphysical forgiveness that the believer aspires to access in his “afterlife.” The poetic conscience envisages this saintly heart as a positive influence on divine judgment, to complement the pure

reason attributed to God. Abandoning the individual soul to this absolving “heart” not only offers the perspective of “eternal life” but also consolidates the previously formulated belief that personal sins will eventually find forgiveness. In light of this, such mental imagery tends to foster a sense of inner peace, which, in the absence of serene, comforting and self-encompassing representations, can be quite challenging to attain.

### **Self-reintegration within symbolic space**

Bishop Ioan Ploscaru’s unwritten, internal poetic discourse of detention - in its initial phase - draws upon a productive interaction of interpretations between personal and cultural memory, thereby, creating a special kind of memory site. It is a non-verbalised, personal site of cultural imagery which caters to the psychological need for self-confidence and protection, amid prolonged loneliness, deprivation and physical suffering. The reworking of mentally activated symbols through the poetic act forms a reflective “sanctuary” of memory via (re)enunciation, memorisation, and (re)interpretation.

In this poetic discourse, each key-symbol has several relevant meanings. Representations assimilated to negative emotional states, that are prone to sustain a traumatised state of mind, receive the “reply” of positive, motivational and value-oriented ones. However, the “dialogue,” of these different interpretations of the same symbolic image converges to significant understandings and attitudes which relate rather abstract aspirations with concrete, individual existence, by reinterpreting the “truth” of prison experience through the lens of a metaphorical “truth.” The resulting synthesis provides a solid interpretive frame, rooted in ahistorical representations, which are part of previously assimilated cultural memory. Such a view constructively reframes the imagery of suffering and provides a protective, metaphorical “sanctuary” of the mind. As such, the poetic discourse tackles spiritual and moral values ingrained in the author’s conscience. Hence, the values become reactivated, and this, in turn, strengthens these psychological bedrocks. In effect, higher psychological resistance to prison trauma and a better grasp of personal experience come about. Therefore, the constructive “dialogue” of symbols played out in Bishop Ioan Ploscaru’s prison poems make up an inner space of self-expression, whose influence contributes to the “survival” of his moral and spiritual identity.

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