HOW SYMBOLIC IMAGINATION TRANSFORMS A HILL INTO A SACRED MOUNTAIN. A SHORT INTRODUCTION IN THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF HEIGHTS

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Abstract: *The heights of the mountains have always fascinated the human mind. Associated with wilderness, purity, seclusion and inaccessibility, peaks have always been a powerful symbol of human creative imagination, being invoked in the sacred myths and sacred songs of all peoples. Residence of gods, refuge of ascetics or final destination for pilgrims, covered by forests or only by rocks, the mountain is a concrete example of how people's natural inclination towards mystery and symbolism works. The symbolic associations and the mythical scenarios that have been woven around the mountain heights have started from certain natural qualities. We propose to present the mechanisms by which the physical perception of these qualities is symbolically transfigured and thus acquires the characteristics of the sublime and of the sacred.*

Keywords*: symbolic imagination, sacred mountain, phenomenology of heights, cosmic experience*

When man learned to orient himself in his natural environment, he first used his senses. They guided him and offered him useful practical experience. With the abstraction ability, he was able to select relevant experiences, comparing, finding similarities and differences, and, through language, he managed to communicate them to other people. The senses have provided him guidance, self-preservation, adaptation and reproduction. But man didn't just confine himself to a more sophisticated adaptation to the environment than other living beings; he set higher standards, aspirations, ideals. He has established his norms and rules and learned to evaluate his own performances. Because man didn't merely confine to describe the daily experience and to communicate it, but he tried to evaluate it, to say whether it was effective, good, beautiful, admirable or sacred, venerable. In other words, the man of any culture or time has never been content with the passive reception of the lessons of the experience, but has reacted by interpreting it. And this ability to evaluate and interpret has accompanied all the events of his life and all the deeds he has deliberately done. So, it can be said that in the real world, there is no concrete experience of man that is not simultaneously an act of interpretation. And in the way of perceiving things he is influenced not only by this natural predisposition or by his personal history, but also by his relationships with other people, by the inherited patterns of interpretation and the shared prejudices, by the cultural history of the community to which he belongs.

For the man of traditional and archaic cultures, the most common experiences of everyday life were re-signified and integrated into codes of conduct that legitimized and made them not only useful, but also beautiful (that is, in accord with a certain harmony, with

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a norm of formal correctness) or sacred (they consecrated them, put them in line with ritual prescriptions and sacramental validation norms). This was the case with food, sexual life, raising children, puberty rites, marriage, exercising skils and crafts, war practices, funeral rites, etc. The natural world offered to the man of ancient cultures a vast field of experiences that could be reinterpreted, revealing themselves as being filled with mystery. Often, in the traditional cultures, the relationship of the man with the divine was mediated by nature; or some of the natural elements appeared as attributes or epiphanies of sacred, transcendent beings. It is the case of mountain peaks, which by their special characteristics could evoke elevated spiritual states and could symbolize the dwelling of gods or even the divinity itself. The snow of the heights, the thunders and lightning, the austere and serene rocks, the rarefied air of the peaks, the earthquakes or the volcanic eruptions are as many hierophanies (manifestations of the sacred) or even kratophanies (manifestations of power), that make the phenomenology of the mountain more than a geologic or a geographical reality. (Ronberg, 2010:108; Biedermann, 2002: 267)

The hierophanies with which phenomenology of religions operates could best explain the behaviour of the sacred present in familiar things, in ordinary experiences and events. Hierophanies are devices of significance that *bring into the presence* (in the familiarity area of everyday life, of routine experiences) the mystery, the sacredness. Hierophanies are also a form of expression of sublime and sacredness, which don't abolish the physical phenomena. This means that the natural phenomenon as object continues to be itself while it is enrolled in the orbit of the sacred realm. Or, the sacred is best expressed, as Rudolf Otto showed, as a rupture, as a radical difference, as supreme otherness. (Otto, 1996) Otto states that the sacred cannot be reduced to anything natural or moral. That it cannot be experienced as such, but only through its effects, in this case, through the psychological ones, through certain special feelings (*mysterium tremendum* and *mysterium fascinans*, for example, but also the impression of majesty, of the sublime). At the same time, the terrible energy of the sacred requires an appropriate mean of manifestation, which can attenuate it and make its message accessible, intelligible. Hierophanies, with their obvious symbolic function, are those devices that make this radical alterity present, accessible. Certain natural qualities of things predispose them for the assignment of sacred and sublime meanings. Certain exemplary events that connect man to a particular place or a certain natural element can invest them with sacredness. The endless expanse of the plains or of the desert, the tumult of the sea thundered by storms or the breath-taking heights of the mountains can stimulate the attitude of pious reverence.

The man of traditional societies was receptive to these meanings because his entire existence (natural, but also cultural, social) was immersed in the cosmic environment and listened to natural rhythms. Human activities, agricultural work, for example, were adjusted in accordance with the different moments of the day or with different periods and seasons of the year. It is easy to see how much this attitude has changed to the man of today, who no longer regards the elements of the natural world with awe, but only as mere self-referential physical presences. Most often he only assigns them a utilitarian meaning and, exceptionally, an aesthetic significance. Symbolic imagination is a faculty that has in common with fantasy only the creative capacity. It doesn't invent new things, nor does it leave the concrete reality to escape into a kingdom of fabulous forms; it doesn't abolish the

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object in order to replace it with a fiction or a *reverie*, but, on the contrary, re-establishes the object by linking it to its transcendent archetype; but, for this, it is necessary that the one who perceives the thing as a symbol to accept a transcendent level of reality and implicitly a scalar ontology; also, to value the transcendent realm and to engage axiologically towards it, recognizing its prestige and sacredness. Hierophanies are symbolic means by which the transcendent archetype of an object or of a living being becomes present and effective in the world of sensible experience and in the immediate reality: only so, a hill can arise to the one who contemplates or climbs it the image of a majestic mountain.

The cultural history of different spiritual traditions recorded a lot of sacred meanings and ritual functions that have been given to the mountain. The mountain has a rich symbolism related to the idea of "height" and "centre". Height, verticality, proximity to the sky can be associated with the idea of "transcendence". For the one who contemplates it, the mountain appears as a geographical point of maximum closeness to the sky. That's why the man of traditional cultures could perceive it as the meeting place of heaven and earth: it shouldn't be forgotten that for the traditional man, heaven and earth had more than a geographical, geological or astronomical significance. In the perimeter of various traditions, the top of the mountain could have been interpreted as the residence of gods or the end of man's ascension. For in these cultures and in these traditions the ascent of man wasn't limited to the professional development or the fulfilment through social recognition. It could have meant spiritual achievement, more precisely, the degree of initiation, approximation or incorporation of a norm of perfection, prescribed by a spiritual practice or tradition, usually associated with a religion. For the modern man, who progressively evacuated the sacred from his public and private life, the idea of ascension remained more a metaphor associated with material, professional and sporting success or with social recognition. Expressions like "on the pinnacle of success or victory" refer to these meanings. The ancient cultures, including the one of Western Middle Ages, saw in the mountain mainly the connotation of the spiritual ascension. Spiritual evolution is described by St. Theresa of Avilla as ascension to Mount Carmel. The mountain peak, meaning the stage of perfection, is associated with the divine condition. That's why mountains are often seen as the inaccessible dwelling of gods. (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1993: 321)

For this reason, the peaks of certain mountains, some with a geographically specific correspondent, have represented the axis of the world for the communities of ancient cultures. Some mountains, like Meru - India; Kunlun - China; Fuji Yama - Japan; Olimp - Greece; Qaf - Islam fulfils this axial function, being invested with absolute sacredness. According to ancient geographer Strabo, the Geto-Dacians used to worship Mount Kogaionon, considered to be Zalmoxe's dwelling. (Evseev, 1994:109) The ethnologist Romulus Vulcănescu, starting from the rituals of the priests of the ancient Dacians, identified, as dominant of the Romanian folk spirituality with pre-Christian roots, the spiritual attitude of *assaulting the sky*. Unlike Lucian Blaga, who spoke of the *transcendent that descends* (Blaga, 1969: 155-162), Vulcănescu attributes to the Romanian folk spirit from different ethno-folklore areas the opposite attitude of the *imanent ascending to heaven*. (Vulcănescu, 1987: 357) For the ancient Romanians, the mountain, like the forest, was a place of refuge from the invaders who stepped the boundaries of the lands they lived. There are situations where the mountain is considered to be the manifestation, the epiphany of

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divinity. This is because the mountain is associated, due to its overwhelming majesty and massiveness, to stability, to absolute force, to sovereignty.

Spirituality and the quest for the divine were often associated with the need for physical ascent, but also for spiritual elevation, perfectly expressed by the motive of the mountain. The mountain contains an extremely rich symbolism present in many religions and spiritual movements where it was often present as a resting place for gods or as the refuge of mythological divinities of all sorts, or as a junction point between heaven and earth, between spiritual and material. It also shows man's millennial desire to be the equal of God or to draw near to heaven, as in the episode of the Babel Tower. (Genesis, 11: 1-9) or in the Qur'anic story of the Pharaoh who desired to raise a tower that would allow him to reach the God of Moses (Qur'an, 28:38). Both the Babylonian ziqqurats and the Egyptian pyramids were nothing but the expression of the human megalomania, of the arrogance and desire of man to come closer to the divine condition by his own forces, to make with human resources the powers and the prestige of the mountain.

In the Bible, the mountain is primarily the place of the Covenant and of the manifestation of the Word of God. In the Old Testament, it is the place chosen by God to fulfil the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham; He also appeared on the mountain to Moses to entrust him His ten commandments. (Exodus, 19:20) Accompanied by powerful symbolic images meant to demonstrate the Creator's omnipotence - fire and thunder, clouds and darkness - the mountain is therefore the place where God has chosen to reveal himself to his people through a prophet. And the angels warn Lot to flee to the mountain so as not to perish in the episode of the destruction of Sodom. (Genesis, 19:17) The mountain sometimes evokes the return to the original faith purified by any corruptive element. In the episode of verifying the fidelity of the chosen people to the Covenant, God addresses the prophet Elijah, who had taken refuge in a cave: „Go out and take your place on the mountain before the Lord." (Kings I, 19:11) We have to do with the dialectic mountain / cavern that we will discuss. In this episode, in contrast to the fire and the cloud that preceded the encounter with Moses, God's presence this time is compared to „a soft and easy whisper":

> Then the Lord went by, and mountains were parted by the force of a great wind, and rocks were broken before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind there was an earth-shock, but the Lord was not in the earth-shock. And after the earth-shock a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire was the sound of a soft breath. (Kings I, 19:11-12)

It is thus evoked a more gentle presence, of ineffable subtlety, beyond the force and the materiality of the elements. Finally, the mountain is present many times in the Book of Psalms where embodies the place of the meeting with the divine: „Send out your light and your true word; let them be my guide; let them take me to your holy mountain and to your tents."(Psalms, 43:3)

In the Gospels, the motif of the mountain continues to evoke the encounter and the proximity to the divine to become as much a place of silence. Here again, it is proclaimed the New Law, but not by God through Moses, but by Jesus Christ himself. The mountain is the place where Christ preaches the Blessings, the first part of the Sermon on the Mount,

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containing the core principles of his teaching, such as the Lord's Prayer. (Matthew, 5-7). It also remains the place of the spiritual experience of the revelation of Christ as Son**.**

> While he was still talking, a bright cloud came over them: and a voice out of the cloud, saying, This is my dearly loved Son, with whom I am well pleased; give ear to him. (Matthew, 17:5)

The transfiguration, accompanied by the presence of Moses and Elijah, in front of the apostles Peter, James, and John, unfolded on a high mountain, Mount Tabor. (Matthew, 17:1; Mark, 9:2) On many occasions, Jesus retires to pray. We can recall the prayer on the Mount of Olives (Luke, 22-39) or how he did after the multiplication of bread when he retired to pray on the mountain (Matthew, 14:23; Mark, 6:46). The mountain is also the test ground in the desert, where the devil tries to tempt Christ, promising Him that He will rule over all the kingdoms of the world.

> Again, the Evil One took him up to a very high mountain, and let him see all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them. And he said to him, all these things will I give you, if you will go down on your face and give me worship. (Matthew, 4:8-9)

Also, the force and solidity of the mountain are evoked to be compared to the power of faith, stronger yet, against which no material element can resist: „If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, Be moved from this place to that; and it will be moved; and nothing will be impossible to you." (Matthew, 17:20) Moreover, Christ was crucified on Mount Golgotha after having climbed this mountain, carrying the cross, a powerful symbol of the restoration of the connection between heaven and earth, of the forgiveness of original sin through the death of the Son. The mountain peak thus becomes the last place of the Son's return to the Father.

In the Qur'an, the mountain is one of the divine "signs" that participates to the praise of the Creator. Having roots in the Old Testament, the symbolism of the mountain enriches the range of its meanings in the Qur'an. First, it has the meaning of "stake" or "anchor", more precisely of foundation of all creation. (Qur'an, 16:15, 21:31) Mount has a role in guiding people, because it serves as a natural landmark for geographic orientation. Together with the stars and plants, the mountain is also considered as a living being that is part of the coherent whole of nature and participates in the great song of praise of the creature to the Creator:

> Do you ever consider that all who are in the heavens and all who are on the earth prostrate themselves to God, and so do the sun, the moon, the stars, the mountains, the trees, and the beasts, and so do many among human beings? (Qur'an, 22:18)

The mountain is also an essential support of the theophany, framed by a vision of nature whose elements are perceived as many signs (ayât) manifesting the divine. The transcendent Creator is thus made accessible through the material forms whose perception must be accompanied by faith. The sensitive perception (linked to the immediate reality), which is common to all people, is completed and transfigured by the *imaginal perception*, which is the perception organ of mystics. The rock from which the mountain is made incarnates the idea of permanence and solidity, contrasting with the fragile, evanescent

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world of the things that surround us; through this attribute of sustainability, he suggests another world that is not subject to death and extinction in nothingness.

The symbolic ascent is marked by dangers if it is not preceded by a certain spiritual preparation. For Richard de Saint Victor the climbing of the mountain is about self-knowledge, and what is happening on the summit is about the knowledge of God. The spiritual ascension is coupled by mystics with the introspection, with the exploration of interiority. It is what reveals the correlative symbol of the cave. Both the mountain and the cave are axial symbols. In the symbolic representation associated with various initiatory practices, the cave is located inside the mountain on the axis joining its top with the centre of the earth; that's why it is a complementary symbol of the mountain. The reverse of the physical and contemplative ascension, which brings about the contemplation of the mountain as an archetype, is the descent into the cave. Symbolically, the mountain is represented by a triangle with the top upwards, and the cave is a triangle, too, but the top is down. The cave is also a representation of the centre, but its symbol is from the register of hiding, anonymity, and darkness, in a word, of mystery. The spiritual message that the neophyte can receive in the privacy of a cavern requires the condition of silence, of non-disclosure. This is why the caves in the mountains represent for many cults and spiritual practices the favourite place of initiatory trials. (Guénon, 1962: 201-205) The reverse analogy between the mountain and the cave is completed at the level of the symbolic perception by the mutual correspondence of the couples light-darkness, vertical triangle-overturned triangle, accessibility-inaccessibility, etc. To illustrate this symbolism, we can evoke the example of Zamolxis which, according to Strabon, isolated himself in a cave before preaching his teaching, or the example of Muhammad who received the revelation of the Qur'an from the mouth of the Archangel Gabriel in the Hira cave on Mount Jabal al Nur - the mountain of light. Likewise, Mount Qaf, which is very important for Muslim cosmology, is for the sufi mystics the profound truth of man - his *haqiqat*, that is, his nature, which is what is really inner and his own.

But Mount Qaf particularly fulfils an axial role in the Muslim cosmology. In this representation of the world, the Earth is imagined as a disk, and Mount Qaf in its midst is separated from the rest of the earth by a region that cannot be crossed. It is a dark stretch that would take four years to be crossed, as the Prophet said. A mountain of spiritual valences is also hard to reach one. According to some writings, Mount Qaf is made of emerald; so we can explain the green colour (for us, blue) of the heavenly vault. In other writings, only the cliff on which Mount Qaf rests is made of emerald. God has conceived it as a pillar, a support of the world. This is another idea specific to the traditional cultures: that the world needs a point of support, a ground. In its absence, the earth would always shake and no creature could live on it. It is not only the centre or the belly of the world, but also the mountain generating the all other mountains, their prototype, the archetypal mountain. They are bound to it by branches and underground veins; when God wants to destroy any land, He orders one of these branches to be shaken, which causes an earthquake. (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1993: 325)

The sacred mountain is perceived as the limit between the visible realm and invisible one. It is the place of the fabulous bird Simorgh, which has existed since the beginning of the world. She retired to this mountain because the wisdom she possesses fits

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with isolation, claustralization, and detachment. In some legends, she is the counsellor of kings and heroes. Mount Qaf and the Simorgh bird symbolize the realities of spiritual life, and are frequently mentioned in *One Thousand and One Nights*. The Simorgh bird is the divine spark in man, and Qaf Mountain is the human nature and, at the same time, the vehicle of this spark or its divine reflection. So, the mountain is understood as an inner reality, *sub speciae interioritatis*, as a psycho-cosmic reality, not just a cosmic one.

In a traditionalist interpretation also, Julius Evola associates mountain climbing with ascetic discipline, heroism and contemplative life. The ascension, even though it is primarily on the physical plane, of the bodily effort, is the opportunity to gain a victory over the inertia and commodities that make us prisoners of the profane world. Ascension can thus be read as a victory, as a release from the bonds of illusion and necessity. That is why the aura of sacredness and mystery surrounding the peaks of the mountains can be connected, following this line of interpretation, with the conquest of immortality. (Evola, 1998:4) Dante also places the terrestrial Paradise on the top of the Purgatory Mountain.

> At these peaks, just as heat transforms into light, life becomes free of itself; not in the sense of the death of individuality or some kind of mystical shipwreck, but in the sense of a transcendent affirmation of life, in which anxiety, endless craving, yearning and worrying, the quest for religious faith, human supports and goals, all give way to a dominating state of calm. (Evola, 1998: 5)

It's a perspective that modern man no longer knows, which he has forgotten. From the initiatic transformation and spiritual realization offered by the mountains, he kept only the aesthetic impression, and from the heroic and ascetic transfiguration produced by ascension in the past, he retained only the recreational tourism or the sporting performance of mountaineering.

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