

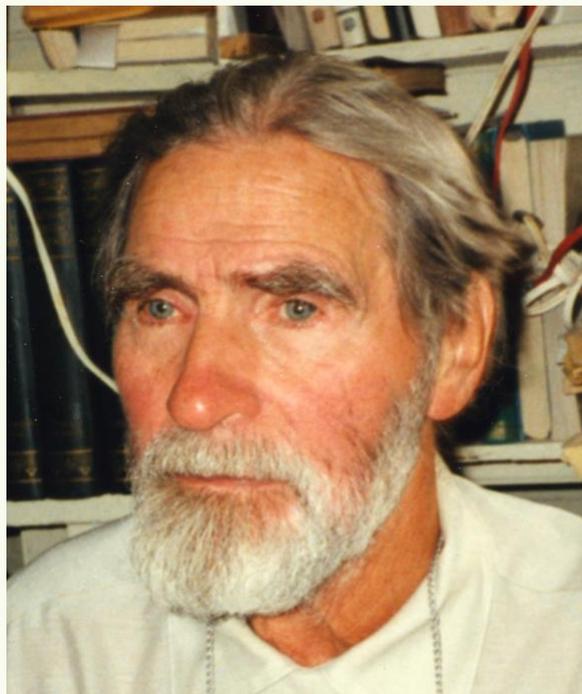
Barka's Ocean: Toward a Translation as Imaginal Praxis

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Abstract: *Vasyl Barka (1908–2003) is a colossal figure in 20th-century Ukrainian literature. Yet his poetry has proven to be extremely difficult to penetrate. Deeply rooted in the Christian mystical tradition, his epic works cover a vast range of human experience — particularly the tragedies that took place on Ukrainian soil during his lifetime. In Ocean, Barka's three-volume collection of lyrical poems, he reveals the natural world as theophany. However, in order to fully grasp this linguistic expression of theophany, one must go beyond conceiving of poetry as mere literary performance or exercise, aimed mainly toward art or aestheticism. This essay proposes a translation of Barka's lyrics as a spiritual practice that entails much more than intellectual analysis. It suggests a type of reading that might reawaken atrophied spiritual faculties embedded in various spiritual traditions.*

Key words: *Barka, imaginal praxis, cathexis of heart, pleroma, symbol, theophany, ta'wil, 'alam al-mithal*

1. A prominent Ukrainian poet once read my translations of Vasyl Barka and said: “Alas, Barka dies in translation.”



Vasyl Barka in 1991 (photo by Caterina Zaccaroni)

Of course I knew what he meant: that there was no way of “faithfully” transmitting the mastery, the utter fullness and complexity of Barka’s lyrics into any language other than the Ukrainian that nurtures them to in turn transform the Ukrainian literary language. But the reply intrigued me by what the poet did not mean, by the seemingly unintentional opening such a statement — “Barka dies in translation” — reveals: the limitless potential afforded by nothing left to lose.

2.

The Ocean

The ocean stirs muscles and moss,
shakes their stone-hold in its froth.

Ridges doze over a blanket of blue;
hundred-candled servants: cherries bloom.

The day decrees the wave’s break
into a chamomile wreath, seething
as it smashes – like a lion! before
the boiling retreats and leaves a mirror
to reflect the smile back to its source.

Freedom, sailing; day by day
your flowing strings drone
like a minstrel in the bay;
a melody of youth out of blue light,
with the thrashing waves you glide
over the water and its evil crypts.

Then a petrel invokes a lightning bolt –
and the rains to nurture nature’s crib.

(Barka *Lyrists* 1947, 127)

This poem was written before Barka set out in 1949 to compose the first of what

would eventually be three volumes of *Ocean*. Although it is not included in *Ocean*, its prescience is remarkable.

Much of the original gets lost, as the very sound of the poem conveys an “onomatopoeic image” of the ocean to generate a sort of synesthesia. The opening lines: “*Prynosyt' mushli v shumy i pomshili / pomshili kameni zdvyhaie okean...*”² echo the sibilant ocean’s incoming surf, followed by the open-throated outflow, the systole and diastole of an endlessly rocking world. Further on, freedom is likened to music and conveyed by a dirge of seven assonant repetitions of “iu” in three lines: “*brynysh i znov melodieiu molodoiu, / vid svitla syn'oiu: bryzkuchoiu vodoiu / letysh nad zloi hlybynoi.*”³

Certain essential elements remain, however: namely, the incessant exploration of nature’s mysterious teleology and its relationship to the freedom of the human soul. Over and over through the thousand pages of *Ocean*, Barka churns the symbolic potential of his work. In time it becomes clear that “Barka’s *Ocean*” is a misnomer. More appropriate would be “*Ocean’s Barka*.”

3. The first volume — some 300 pages — was composed between 1949 and 1954. Barka (1908–2003) was in his early forties. During the 1930s he was effectively denied publication in the Soviet Union. His first book of poetry, *Ways* (1930), was accused of “residual religiosity” and he was obliged to work part-time in a metalworking factory as a form of reeducation, which led to a collection of poems that could be translated as *Workshops*, or even *Guilds* (1932). After more attacks from Communist Party publications, he realized he wouldn’t be published anymore and simply “went silent.” Already in 1928, he had left Ukraine proper, due to conflicts with local apparatchiks, to settle in Krasnodar, just north of the Caucasus Mountains, where there were many Ukrainians descended from the Kuban Cossacks. In 1932 Barka married a Circassian woman. They not only managed to survive Stalin’s artificial famine of 1932–33, but in the spring of 1933 his wife gave birth to their son. Throughout the 1930s Barka studied philology and medieval Italian literature, defending his doctoral dissertation in Moscow on “the realistic and fantastic in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.” In many respects it was this deep-dive into Dante that definitively pulled him away from his atheism and fast-waning communist convictions, back to the Orthodox Christianity of his childhood. When World War II broke out he volunteered as a soldier in the Red Army and was seriously wounded — in fact, he was clinically dead and experienced an angelic vision while seemingly unconscious. After a long recovery he was taken to Germany as a prisoner in 1943. There he worked as forced labor in Berlin, both as editor of a Ukrainian publication and firefighter, putting out the blazes caused by daily Allied incendiary bombing. It was during this hellish period of Berlin in flames that Barka started writing again. After the war he managed to escape repatriation and lived first in the displaced person camps, then throughout Germany and France, until 1949, when he crossed the Atlantic to settle in the

United States. In retrospect one sees how *Ocean* delivered Barka.

Volume I is a collection of intimate songs of longing and love. The most obvious paradigm is the Songs of Songs. The verses — though for the most part consisting of quatrains composed in strict octasyllabic iambic lines — defy redundancy. Each line is meticulously crafted with regard to alliterative intricacies, culminating in a deft manipulation of rhyme and half-rhyme. The repetition is rather like the surf: each wave ebbs into its own unique composition.

In another poem entitled “The Ocean,” as throughout the volume, Barka’s mode is ecstatic. Love of a man for a woman is conveyed as a cosmic reflection of God’s love for the world, and vice versa.

I’ve waited so long for the splashing breath –
like a violin in my chest.
The whispering waves will not wane;
my beloved calls me to the wine.

The song’s potential swells the heart
with the ocean’s trembling;
I pronounce this grief before all the roses –
renounce my sweet life’s blood to God.

(Barka *Ocean I* 46)

The beloved is present throughout. She is the manifold source of the lover’s ecstasy — here equated with light, there with the earth, elsewhere with traditional iconographical elements such as the Church, the Virgin, or even Christ.

Volume II — of equal length, composed from 1964 to 1969 — reflects a more mystical mode. The meter tends toward the trochaic and this gives the quatrains a more ponderous, solid feel. Nature, already present in abundance in Volume I, takes a central position and acts as fulcrum. A system of symbolics developed in earlier poems has matured into a polished matrix of correspondences allowing strange and seemingly illogical representations of the natural world to connect visible reality with unseen presences and intelligences, conveyed imaginably through water, wind, fields, light, plants, fire — or, in the realm of the manmade, through icons and churches.

Here is where *Ocean* expands and one recognizes that the work is — or at least must be read as — a deluge of the Holy Spirit. Meditations on nature are informed by a deep religiosity (in the most profound sense of re-ligare — to re-

link). They seem to enact a devotional perforation of transcendental entities, which symbols carry back toward the source. Here also is where the unwilling or irreverent “objective” criticism dies with the translation — in that area between signifier and transcendental signified that can exist only in a field of faith.

And the storm’s branches unlock
the blue apple blossom: our ocean.

(Barka *Ocean II* 276)

Volume III (equal length, composed between 1979 and 1985) breaks away from the strict meters of the first two volumes. A prophetic mode is established. Moral, ethical and didactic streams are confronted by the relentless, enigmatic energy of Barka’s symbolics. Nature goes beyond being a composite of waymarks and takes its place as an actively communicative organism. A certain plenitude is approached in the treatment of death as topos.

In Volume I the beloved maintained the center; in Volume II nature, angelic and holy, subsumes both lover and beloved. Volume III integrates *Ocean* with an apocalyptic vision out of which all other themes fan out as if from a light source.

Whether it is a rhyming meditation on the rotting bough of a tree:

The rotted pine lay like a spine
in the shaken-down decomposed detritus.
The carcass diminishes on dead fragments –
condemned: from its needles to the grass.
In time – we are impassable pine forests...

(Barka *Ocean III* 320)

Or, in the apophatic approach to a recurring eschatological vision:

And what was: the earth, like a dream-gull,
disappears! as we worry; sunflowers spill
over with dew, and fog pours over blue graves
where our sleeping ancestors lay...

(Barka *Ocean III* 321)

Death and resurrection through divine love integrate all vectors present in *Ocean*. The symbolic turbulence that is the work's current is in fact an active agent of integration indicative of a mysterious teleological expansiveness. *Epektasis*, to use a Greek term elaborated by Gregory of Nyssa.

4. It should be apparent already that this is by no means an objective critical analysis of Barka's *Ocean*. On the contrary, it is an account of the active process of "giving in" to a mystical poetics in order to be "carried back" to the source of same imaginal presence. Any defense or repudiation of the transcendent would be utterly irrelevant after the leap that translation as imaginal praxis necessitates.

Ocean is transcendence — transcendence as circuminsessional to immanence; the work of inundating all presence, all substance, all being with that which is beyond the boundaries of the ontological subjugations imposed by intellection, and by inundating the beyond with presence, being and substance. By making the word flesh — again.

Imaginal praxis is the way of my "giving in" to Barka's *Ocean*. I do not translate *from X to Y*; rather, the work transfers me through to the imaginal field where *Ocean*'s interpenetrating realities engulf me. The translation that happens is merely the record of a close reading of the text that serves as a map — much as constellations guide the navigator.

Above all, imaginal praxis requires a cathexis of heart. In the topos of *Ocean*, this must involve faith as the absorption of one's rational, emotional and imaginal consciousness in the presence of the poetry. To cite the 18th-century Ukrainian philosopher Hryhory Skovoroda, one of Barka's precursors: "What is faith if not the unveiling and illumining of the incomprehensible and unseen by the heart?"⁴.

Without this cathexis of heart the fullness of Barka's *Ocean* simply dies.

5. Barka is a religious poet. Again, it must be emphasized: religious in the deepest sense of the word. Mircea Eliade's description of *homo religiosus* is an apt introduction to *Ocean*'s Barka:

For religious man, nature is never only "natural"; it is always fraught with a religious value. This is easy to understand, for the cosmos is a divine creation; coming from the hands of gods, the world is impregnated with sacredness...

We must not forget that for the religious man the supernatural is indissolubly connected with the natural, that nature always expresses something that transcends it.⁵

One can appreciate the monumental scope of Barka's universe. One can appreciate the fantastic imagery: "Wet seagulls wept out of storms." Or, if one is fortunate enough to be able to read the original, there is no escaping the avalanche of prosodic severity and syntactical innovation carrying both traditional and uniquely personal tropes to a visionary climax:

A stav nad kryn, mov krylac, vechir,
svitanok – korabel' nad kryn
(doloni poklady na plechi,
i shepit v ridnosti: prylyn').⁶
(Barka *Ocean I 7*)

Night stood upon the lily, like a choir,
dawn-light – a ship upon the lily
(puts its palm on my back
and whispers kindly: come).

One can appreciate numerous "literary" aspects of *Ocean*, but ultimately there is no way to go beyond the surface of it without a feeling for the religious man's view of existence. As Walt Whitman said: "No one will get at my verses who insists upon viewing them as a literary performance, or attempt at such performance, or as aiming mainly toward art or aestheticism."⁷

For Barka, nature always expresses something that transcends it. As an integral part of a divinely created cosmos, it cannot do otherwise. In *Ocean*, nature is not merely anthropomorphized; rather, it establishes itself teleologically as a mirror of man (shadow as well as light) who is but a mirror of the world — a microcosm of the macrocosm. Thus one hears throughout *Ocean* the persistent reverberation of divine essence reflected by the human soul.

Flowers are saints and saints are flowers.

In their introduction to the Barka section of *Coordinates: an Anthology of Ukrainian Émigré Poets*, the editors, Bohdan Boychuk and Bohdan Rubchak, examine a certain dialectical quality in Barka's work:

Barka's world view is based on two traditions: on one side his own ascetic, nobly Slavonic, though strongly biblical religiosity,

and on the other, the sensual love of life's many shades, perhaps of folkloric origins. In some works the ascetic-Christian and sensual-pagan aspects are sharply opposed, sometimes developing the poet's monolithic universe through violent collisions. And even when in these collisions the ascetic aspect overpowers the philosophical, or the sensual aspect overpowers the poetic, the divine riches, the colors and the almost intoxicated nature of Barka's style itself already reflects the world's riches, wherein the enraptured poet dwells. However, most often these two elements — sensual love of the world and humble religiosity — are in accord: the beauty of the world comes from God.⁸

There is one principal state toward which this dialectic navigates in the work: pleroma.

In an attempt to describe the abundance of sound, image and motion interacting in the composition, some critics have called Barka's poetry "maximal." Classical composer Leonid Hrabovsky, who put several of *Ocean's* compositions to music, felt it necessary (despite being one of the first Soviet composers to adopt minimalism) to "vary the musical rhythms maximally, and to create not descriptive but absolute, independent music, to the same degree that Barka's poetry is absolute, not descriptive."⁹

Barka's imagery is rarely descriptive of specific elements severed from the fullness of the Whole that animates and sustains those elements. There is always the relentless procession of symbolic imagery driving the composition simultaneously to the heart and sum of all matter, to awaken the dormant plenitude and meaning of Being in matter — to convey the world "in the fullness of him that filleth all in all" (Eph 1:23).

If one must attach a label, then perhaps "pleromic" would be more appropriate than "maximal" — so as to highlight the qualitative plenitude toward which *Ocean* extends rather than the quantity that maximal implies.

There is no denying that Barka's *Ocean* is "loaded." (In fact, there is just too much baggage for many readers). The copious torrents of elemental references: light, fire, sun, stars, earth, wheat, air, wind, storms, and dozens of different flowers and birds. Each such image contains a symbolic value for which a structural analysis based on a Saussurian sign/signifier paradigm would strike me as useful but ultimately inadequate. There are too many peripheral referents to be grasped in relation to the fullness that coheres and integrates the work on a level of praxis (as opposed to theory). Indeed, a structural or even deconstructive analysis of Barka's *Ocean* — seeped as it is in Christian imagery, iconography, and eschatology, as well as classical aesthetics, folkloric elements, and the modernistic contextual field from which it springs — would make for a challenging and

fascinating study; but such a study (unless it went “beyond itself”) would by its nature attempt to dissect the very integrality of *Ocean*, and therefore run counter to a translation as imaginal praxis. The symbols in imaginal praxis are not there to be cut up or analyzed. Symbols defy analysis and rational logic. Rather, the symbols present themselves to engulf *all* their referents, primary and peripheral, in order to integrate them as immanent vessels of the Transcendent One.

Another term used by critics to describe Barka’s poetry is “iconographic.” Certainly the icon as image of the Divine depicted in strictly delineated form might serve as a convenient model in grasping the essence of his poetry were it not for the lack of an essential and ineluctable element found throughout *Ocean*: kinesis. Icons (that is, the traditional Byzantine style of religious painting most commonly associated with the word, which in Greek means “image”) portray divinity by means of static, formalistic composition, whereas Barka’s pleromic poetics insists on a kinetic and dynamic depiction of the Divine.

Ocean, if anything, is a kinetic icon of language — of Logos itself. Barka, if any-body, is a navigator of the human soul.

6. I began translating Barka’s poetry in 1988, shortly after I’d met him in Glen Spey, New York. Initially there was some resistance on my part to many aspects of his poetics. What kept me going was a deep fascination with his utterly unique usage of the Ukrainian language, the monumental structures in which he worked, and most of all, the sheer strangeness of his symbolics. It seemed to me that he had continued developing a symbolist poetics far beyond the point where most Anglo and French poets had rejected it. In one of our many conversations, Barka once said to me, “I was born a symbolist.”

However, to place Barka under the rubric of “symbolist poet” would be to shrink a giant. There is so much more to the poetry. And I only “got it” from translating every word and looking at every image, in the order they are presented, looking and feeling, hearing the sounds of the words, hearing the gulls, feeling the heat of the glowing coals, the rings of fire surrounding me, feeling the delicate rose petal and integrating it all in the light that gleams across *Ocean*’s surface. The praxis was nothing more structured than this: giving in — as compelled by glint of faith — to the imaginal world of the poem as a vessel to something beyond.

Over the following years my grasp of Barka’s symbolics became more secure. Early on, whenever I encountered an ambiguous trope — as is often the case with a poet who invents his own words and revels in the fact that the Ukrainian literary language, unlike Russian or English, is still “like molten metal” — I would immediately go for the translation that seemed to undermine a conventional Orthodox Christian worldview. Invariably, when I went over the text face to face with the author, I would see that it was exactly that Orthodox Christian worldview — an inherently mystical view — that was at the poem’s core.

The ambiguation was meant to shift the refracting prism ever so slightly, yet I wanted to flip it upside-down.

I continued translating, studying Barka's inexhaustible sources: the Bible, classical epic poetry, the Church Fathers, St. Thomas Aquinas, Dante, the troubadours of Provence, Persian Sufi poetry, the great spiritual classics of the East, Milton, the 17th-century metaphysical poets, Hryhory Skovoroda, Taras Shevchenko, Nikolai Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Vladimir Solovyov, Sergei Bulgakov, Pavlo Tychna, and many of the Russian and French symbolists, et al... I tried to stay away from any theoretical formulations regarding Barka's poetry, and watched instead my own personal, spiritual transformation — guided by Barka's universe.

The turning point that generated these notes was my encounter with Sufi poetry, specifically Henri Corbin's book, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*.

In his book on the colossal medieval Arabic philosopher and poet, Corbin introduces the reader to the concept of *ta'wil*:

The *taw'il* is essential symbolic understanding, the transmutation of everything visible into symbols, the intuition of an essence or person in an Image which partakes neither of universal logic nor of sense perception, and which is the only means of signifying what is to be signified. [...]

The *ta'wil* presupposes a flowering of symbols and hence the active Imagination, the organ which at once produces symbols and apprehends them; it presupposes the angelic world between the pure Cherubic intelligences and the universe of sensory, historical and juridical facts. By its very essence the *ta'wil* can not inhabit the realm of everyday fact; it postulates an esoterism.¹⁰

I immediately connected this passage to one I had encountered in Barka's essay, "The Nature of Poetry":

The metaphor, like a spiritual advance, like a burst of figurative thought, finds itself on the border between rows of phenomena; its aim is to create an unexpected illumination in expressing the unknown, most authentic essence of one phenomenon by transferring the qualities of another phenomenon onto it. Without unnecessary details, both expose themselves by means of a linguistic illustration, with a new clarity, as though from an overworld, as though encompassed by the consciousness of an equitable universal force that unites them,

finding a semblance in them.¹¹

I showed the Corbin passage to Barka — who, incidentally, had studied Persian and translated Nizami, among others, into Ukrainian — and he reacted emphatically: “This is it!”

Ta'wil — literally “to carry back” — is a spiritual hermeneutics which presupposes a hierarchy of realities. One level of reality, according to Sufi metaphysics, is the *'alam al-mithal* “to which our imaginative faculty specifically relates, the intermediary between the world of pure spiritual realities, the world of Mystery, and the visible, sensible world.”¹² In practicing *ta'wil* the hermeneut is “carried back” to the Imaginal World by means of the Creative Imagination and the symbol that initiates it.

[O]ur Active Imagination is a moment, an instant, of the Divine Imagination that is the universe, which is itself total theophany.

Each of our imaginations is an instant among theophanic instants, and it is in this sense that we call it “creative.” [...]

The Creative Imagination is theophanic Imagination, and the Creator is one with the imagining creature because each Creative Imagination is a theophany, a recurrence of the Creation.

Psychology is indistinguishable from cosmology;
the theophanic Imagination joins them into a psycho-cosmology.
Bearing this in mind, we can now investigate the human organ of visions,
of transferences, and of the transmutation of all things into symbols.¹³

This is the perspective from which Barka’s *Ocean* must be apprehended: as theophanic prayer. The Creative Imagination carries the “translator” or hermeneut back via the symbolics of theophanic prayer to the Imaginal World wherein the image of God, the icon, appears.

To put it in terms closer to Barka’s primary cultural reservoir:

The invisible exists in the visible, it is contained by it and grows with it either concretely or as symbol. “Symbol,” according to its precise meaning, is something that belongs to this world, yet involves otherworldly connections and content, a unity between the transcendent and immanent, a bridge between heaven and earth, a divinely created, divinely human unity.”¹⁴

Symbolic understanding and the various levels of the real it implies have always informed the written text. Such a manifold reality has always been an essential and integral aspect of magico-religious rituals; and poetry has to some degree always depended on symbolic logic to sustain it. “Whatever its context, a symbol always reveals the basic oneness of several zones of the real.”¹⁵ It cannot be overstated that in order to adequately penetrate Baraka’s *Ocean* one must accept the existence of other, unseen worlds and read every trope as a waymark leading to the integration of these worlds in the movement of the text. Ideas and concrete things are interdependent circuminsessionally; they are persons of each transrational entity in a complex composition of the Whole.

Further still: magico-religious experience
[Baraka’s *Ocean* is certainly such an experience—SL]
makes it possible for man himself to be transformed into a symbol.
And only in so far as man himself becomes a symbol, are all systems
and anthropocosmic experiences possible, and indeed in this case his own life
is considerably enriched and enlarged. Man no longer feels himself to be
an “air-tight” fragment, but a living cosmos
open to all the other living cosmoses by which he is surrounded.¹⁶

7. What sets Baraka’s work apart from many of his contemporaries is that — unlike so much poetry in the 20th century, which rallied behind the rebellious and revolutionary cries of the avant-garde and sought to reject traditional forms and ideas — Baraka strives to integrate rather than revolt. Instead of discarding the ancient forms as “unacceptable” for this century, he integrates and subsumes the essence of *all* developments in writing throughout human history. Some critics have argued that certain forms — in particular forms that appear to be closed — are no longer viable in a century that has experienced so many ruptures, upheavals and horrors. Yet Baraka is one of the few writers of his stature to have witnessed directly — through experience and not through the media — so many of the 20th century’s upheavals and horrors: from the Russian Civil War, to the heady first years of the Soviet Union as a strident young communist; then Stalinism and the Holodomor, Stalin’s genocidal artificial famine of 1932–33 (recounted in Baraka’s masterpiece novel *The Yellow Prince*); clinical death at the hands of the Wehrmacht, followed by imprisonment and slave labor in Nazi Germany; the Holocaust; and finally the entire second half of the 20th century in the prosperous United States. So when Baraka proclaims the wholeness and unity of divine creation, it does not come from bookish naiveté, but rather from the innocence achieved through harsh and brutal experience — experience integrated with light. Hence the colossal stature of his oeuvre. All of Baraka is epic. *Ocean* concentrates on the immeasurable bridge between what is palpable or perceivable and what is beyond the horizon. This is executed through the timeless form of an

inexhaustible love song.

Given the nature and scope of these notes it would not be appropriate to take specific symbols recurrent in Barka's *Ocean* and treat them abstracted from the whole (although a Barkian symbolology would certainly make for a fascinating hermeneutic exposition). Rather, I intend merely to explore what I've gleaned from *Ocean's* symbolics (much of which, frankly, is ineffable) by choosing one poem, the first poem of the last volume, and move through the tropes in a very free-handed manner.

That said, I would, however, like to point out that all the nearly 1,000 poems in *Ocean* are to some degree a meditation on nature or the cosmos. The few exceptions — and these are significant — tend to be meditations scattered throughout the three volumes on either icons or churches. This is an important element of the Oceanic aesthetic. Only God's creation and reflections of God's love are worthy of the love song. If anything be "manmade," it must reflect the conscious love of God as the motive for its creation. Thus, a cathedral represents the mystical body of Christ, and its structures are images of the divine construction reflected in the mirror of man and his devotion to God. Each element of *Ocean* is to some extent holographic — that is, it contains the entire image, albeit in weaker form — of the Whole: nature integrated through sacred architecture.

One symbol, however, must be examined: the ocean. Here I would just as soon give in to Eliade's brilliant introduction to aquatic symbolism:

To state the case in brief, water symbolizes the whole of potentiality:
it is *fons et origo*, the source of all possible existence.

"Water, thou art the source of all things and of all existence" says one Indian text, (Bhavisyottarapurana 31,14) summing up the long Vedic tradition.

Waters are the foundations of the whole world; (Satapatha-Brahmana)
they are the essence of plant life, the elixir of immortality,
they ensure long life and creative energy,
they are the principle of all healing, and so on.

Principle of what is formless and potential, basis of every cosmic manifestation,
container of all seeds, water symbolizes the primal
substance from which all forms come and to which they will return
either by their own regression or in a cataclysm. [...]

Every contact with water implies regeneration:
first because dissolution is succeeded by a "new birth,"
and then because immersion fertilizes, increases the potential of life
and of creation. [...] It contains in itself all possibilities, it is supremely fluid,
it sustains the development of all things, and is therefore
either compared or even directly assimilated with the moon.

Its rhythms are fitted to the same pattern as the moon's;

they govern the periodic appearance and disappearance of all forms,
they give a cyclic form to the development of things everywhere.¹⁷

As Barka's ocean exclaims in "The Undertaken":

I am only the executer: to lock
as the angel of death commands! –
under the roar of funerary waves.

At the peal of church bells,

I am the executer.

(Vasyl Barka *Ocean III* 138)

8. Time of Judgment

Soul: resurrected through vision, beyond this life;
like its dream (– the sister's mystery).

And memories? – after a storm the sky
sees rainbows bowing in the field.

The heavenly ship, a telling sign! – 5
bereaves as it divides.

Youth, caressing us with grace,
sprung lilies in our earthly breasts;
let's seal them! and never mention the wake,
transfigure them instead through white asceticism; 10
seal them shut in the sarcophagus
and keep the key in the abyss.

Grave-dwellers are called beyond the scythe
to seraphic wings: alight with fire
in the deathless field. 15

The earth's child, its blossom, attests –
to the wedding crowns' vitality: their recital;
from two entwined cherry branches: two wedlock souls!
their recital, of love. 20

The undertaking ship: its sails like death banners;
measureless dismemberment!
Inextinguishable kin:
like the sea's youth as the east ignites.

The dread unailable depths 25
have severed us: in the judgment! – the abscent.

Only the ocean will live through the dawn:
in flames – the earth's womb flooded with rubies;
there the land's anguish burns out!
Bright-breasted life 30
spans its wings: through the mercy of the dearest.
Above our dreams' blue, over the deep,
the moon bleaches through death, to certify;
where we, the most sincere, once stood,
it illumines a sign on the worldly surplice! – 35
to adorn ourselves in the final sentence:
the family of faith.

8.VII.79 (Vasyl Barka *Ocean III* 5)

9. "Time of Judgment" is the prelude to *Ocean* Volume III, whose focus is clear: a meditation on the dynamics of death.

1) The Soul thunders out and looms there over volume III of *Ocean* — the Soul as Ocean, deep as its mystery, the incessant pounding and throbbing dynamic of Spirit — beyond the horizon of life we "see," that is, experience as such, and into a time of balances re-turning resurrectional...

2) Its (the Soul's) dream creating the world, Morphean, beyond logic, and

chaste as the fertile field of a sister's (literally nun-like) mystery, the fruit that comes of a virgin womb.

3,4) A rhetorical exploration of consciousness' trans-vital verticality, rainbows bowing from sky to field — backward glance at the life of flesh seen from the perspective of spirit.

5,6) The heavenly ship/bark — a communicative entity — this consciousness cuts, dissects, discerns, and destroys with a blessed dialectic, a cruel sword of love in the hands of a spiritual corsair ship.

7-12) “Us” initiates a prophetic mode sustained throughout Vol. III, our fate, our death, our youth because we as one divide — no one without the other. Grace as divine energy/operation (see Gregory Palamas) nurtures the bloom of resurrectional potential in the passionate and earthly heart; to lock the potential and transfigure them with white asceticism, the praxis of full-light. There is in the death a light — lilies' soft petals, the barely fragrant chalice — pistil and stamens of continuum — beyond — sealed as Hermes.

13-15) Beyond the razor discernment of passing a/way is the call to Milton's “sworded seraphim” (see “Christ's Nativity”) — highest of the angelic orders (see Pseudo-Dionysius) transmitting pure love-light and fire, impregnating the field with immortality.

16-20) The child invokes birth, new life, attests to it. The “Time...” in the title is not merely one post-mortem and eschatological instant in a procession of instances, but generative and cyclical as well — pleromic paradox — reconciliation of poles in scales of the Divine. Deep sexual imagery — twilight language, or *sandhana bhāsa*: “a deconstruction of language which contributes toward breaking the profane universe and replacing it by a universe of convertible and integrable planes.”¹⁸ Creativity, by necessity, implies union, *re-ligare* — a deep oceanic intercourse between the flesh/fruit and spirit/recital — a physical communion “carried back” to spiritual espousal. The technique's name, “twilight language,” redoubles the necessary ambiguation such poetic movement engenders.

21-24) A connecting image: the Soul's operation as transfiguring (via death) discernment — the cutting of semblances — unity in diversity informed by the sun's implicated rebirth.

25, 26) That which is deep within does the cutting, it balances and absconds (conflation of ascent, abscission and absent — in the original: “branching out,” *epektasis*)...

27-29) And this depth is purified through fire — “the earth's womb flooded with rubies” — the light redeems all suffering — through the “sister's mystery” — through the enigma of fruition.

30, 31) Life likened to a bird whose heart is of light and whose wings enact a gesture of unification. The heart in Barka, as in Hesychast and Sufi understanding,

is the center of spiritual life.

32-35) The moon's cyclical nature reads through the deep, through the water, all inclusive, incessant, integral, and shines on the point of peace on earth: the cross — at the intersection of transcendent and immanent: in Christ.

36,37) Soul — consciousness — is guided toward the ultimate pleroma: kinship within a differentiated unity.

10. But Barka dies in analysis as well as translation. The structures that present his *Ocean* belie the inexhaustibility of its content: ever-changing and ever-fresh — each wave destroying and revealing something of the deep.

Ultimately *Ocean* is concerned with death — the divine operation that initiates it, the love that sustains it, and the reality beyond it. The resurrection is everywhere, ceaselessly trampling death down. And judgment is to be found in every act of differentiation, every cut and rupture.

As *Ocean's* form reveals the fullness of its nature, consciousness is led inexorably to the Apocalypse.

Apocalypse: to reveal.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin expresses it this way:

One has trouble imagining what the end of a World could be. A sidereal catastrophe would be fairly symmetrical with regard to our individual deaths. But it would bring the end of the Earth rather than the Cosmos — and it is the Cosmos that must disappear.

The more I dream of this mystery, the more I see it take the form of a “return” of consciousness — an eruption of the interior life —
an ecstasy...

We need not rack our brains to know how the material enormity of the Universe could ever fade away. It is enough for the mind to turn inside out, to change zones in order to change
the form of the World immediately.

When the end of time approaches a terrifying spiritual pressure exerts itself at the limits of the Real through the effort of souls desperately holding to a desire to escape the Earth. This pressure will be unanimous.

But the Scriptures instruct us that the pressure will be simultaneously traversed by a profound schism — some wishing to escape in order to dominate the World more, and others, upon the word of Christ, wait passionately for the World to die, to be absorbed with it in God.

Then, undoubtedly, upon Creation carried to the paroxysm
of its ability to achieve union, the Parousia will occur...

Like an immense tide, Being will have dominated the trembling of beings.

In the bosom of a tranquil Ocean, of which each drop
will have a consciousness unto itself, the extraordinary adventure
of the world will have ended. The dream of all mystics will have found
its legitimate satisfaction.¹⁹

Ocean's concluding poem, "Island of Light" charts the Parousia in symbolic terms: "The blizzard ruined the bloom / my love! — our youth in the field." It then proceeds with a series of enigmatic images preceded by the anaphora "transient":

Transient: sun-spun threads – the skein
approaches a bee in the tarweed.

Sparks: marked dreams and apparitions,
transient: tornadoed iris-constellations.

(Barka, *Ocean III* 321)

There are recurring intimations of multiplicity and growth: water lilies are "white chalices coupled by the boat's bow," bird nests, spring herbs, night cradling an infant, even "God's green-rainbowed brow" (see Rev. 4:3) And all of it is like a dream — transient.

The end is recursive. Even the title, "Island of Light," hints at the moon with its cyclical effects on the ocean. But the island of light is also a symbolic union of spirit/light and matter/earth. This is the core of *Ocean*: the point of intersection, the heart of the cross, summoned and sung out in a feast of interpenetrating images. To get there requires a commitment, a cathexis of heart, a holding fast to faith. The praxis is the ride, a journey to the Imaginal World, carried back by made things and things we are made of till there is no telling what is dream or not in the dream that reveals us as no longer here but of the field...

The resurrectional field: in floral fire
proclaims, purifies – the suffering is complete!
and the ocean: tracelessly sways the wheat.

(Barka, *Ocean III* 321)

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Notes:

¹ Stash Luczkiw is an American-born poet, novelist, journalist and translator. A version of this essay was translated into Ukrainian by Vasyl Ivashko and published in *Svito-vid*, Kyiv-New York, in 1994. All translations are the author’s unless otherwise indicated.

² “Приносить мушлі в шумі і помшлі / помшлі камені здвигає океан.” Vasyl Barka, *Lirnyk: Vybrani Poezii*, (New York: New York Group, 1968) 127.

³ “Бриниш і знов мелодію молодую, / від світла синьою: бризкучою водою / летиш над злою глибиною.” Ibid. 128

⁴ Hryhory Skovoroda, *Virshi, Pisni, Baiky, Dialohy, Traktaty, Prytchi, Prozovi Pereklady i Lysty* (Kyiv: Kyiv Naukova Dumka, 1983), 189.

⁵ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* trans. Willard R. Trask, (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1959) 117–118.

⁶ “А став над крин, мов крилас, вечір, / світанок – корабель над крин / (долоні поклади на плечі, / і шепіт в рідності: прилинь).”

⁷ Walt Whitman, “A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads” 1888, in *The Portable Walt Whitman*, (New York: Penguin, 1973) 311-312

⁸ Bohdan Boychuk & Bohdan Rubchak (eds.), *Koordinaty: Antolohiia suchasnoi ukraiins'koi poezii na zakhodi* (Munich: Suchasnist, 1969) 62.

⁹ Leonid Hrabovsky, *Program notes from retrospective concert at Alice Tully Hall, Lincoln Center*, (New York, 1992) 20b.

¹⁰ Henri Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism Ibn 'Arabi* trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton/Bollingen, 1969) 13–14.

¹¹ Vasyl Barka, “The Nature of Poetry” in AGNI 35, originally in *Zemlia Sadivnychykh (The Gardner’s Earth)* 198.

¹² Corbin, 217.

¹³ Ibid. 214–215.

¹⁴ Sergei Bulgakov, *Pravoslavie*, (Kyiv: Lybid, 1991) 11.

¹⁵ Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religions* trans. Rosemary Sheed, (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1958) 452.

¹⁶ Ibid. 455.

¹⁷ Ibid 188–189.

¹⁸ Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton/Bollinger, 1958) 250.

¹⁹ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *L’Avenir de l’homme* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1959) 401–403.