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When Poetry Becomes Emotion: Embodying Compunction in Selected Katanyktic Poems from the Middle and Late Byzantine Period*

ABSTRACT: This article presents an analysis of the somatic effects of *κατάνυξις* (“compunction”), a prominent emotion within the Byzantine penitential tradition, as depicted in Middle and Late Byzantine katanyktic poetry. These texts provide a unique lens through which to examine Byzantine conceptions of interiority. Following an initial overview of katanyktic poetry and its defining characteristics, this study elucidates the concept of compunction and its significance within the Byzantine cultural and religious context. Subsequently, the corpus of texts selected for analysis is delineated. Finally, the article explores the corporeal manifestations of *κατάνυξις* in penitents, with specific consideration given to the physical mortifications employed as expressions of inner repentance. The analysis reveals that the Holy Scriptures served as a primary source of models for penitential behavior and provided vivid imagery for the representation of compunction.

KEYWORDS: Byzantine Poetry, Middle and Late Byzantine Period, Byzantine Emotionality, Embodied Repentance, Scriptural Influence.

1. Katanyktic Poems: A Literary Genre on Emotions in Byzantium

Byzantine katanyktic poems are characterized as «personal texts in a first-person voice, with compunction (*κατάνυξις* in Greek) as their primary thematic focus»¹. These poems are of significant value for the study of Byzantine emotionality, as they transcend mere literary composition, having been actively

* I wish to express my deepest gratitude to Prof. Sotera Fornaro and Dr. Thomas Kuhn-Treichel for kindly agreeing to host my study in this special issue of the journal. I also extend my heartfelt thanks to the anonymous reviewers, whose insightful comments not only contributed to significantly improving my article, but also provided me with valuable perspectives for the further development of my research. All translations of Old Testament verses are drawn from the NETS translation. Unless otherwise specified, all remaining translations are mine.

¹ Cocola 2023 vol. 1, p. 13. The first in-depth study on the emotion of *κατάνυξις* and the Byzantine poems related to it has recently been published by Cocola 2023, voll. 1-2. Studies on the expression of compunction in Byzantine hymnography and liturgy can be found in Krueger 2014 and Mellas 2020. For a general introduction on *κατάνυξις*, I refer to Giannouli 2009; Hinterberger 2006 and 2017. For a general bibliography on emotions in Byzantium, see: Hinterberger 2010; Cipolla et al. 2018; Cairns et al. 2022; Mullett, Harvey 2022.

performed within diverse religious and spiritual settings, both individual and communal. The enactment of these texts facilitated the experience of compunction among Byzantine readers, predominantly monastic, thereby fostering repentance and the pursuit of post-mortem salvation². A salient characteristic of these works is the articulation of a penitent first-person voice, acknowledging personal transgressions and expressing a fervent desire for conversion through penitential acts, including weeping and tears. Evidential sources, particularly hagiographical narratives, attest to the concrete performance and rehearsal of the acts of compunction described in katanyktic poems. A notable example is found in the twelfth-century *Life of Cyril Phileotes*, authored by Cyril's disciple, Nikolaos Kataskepenos³. Specifically, in chapter 42, Nikolaos narrates the account of the elderly monk Auxentios, who succumbed to severe illness resulting from the incessant recitation of katanyktic prayers in verse, performed both nocturnally and diurnally:

And so great was his compunction that he hardly rested during the night itself and the day. For, after collecting the stichera of the eight tones and the katanyktic kanones, he composed a book and did not rest, but continued to sing that book night and day with a fervent heart. Within a few days, due to the abundant tears he had shed, *his body had become so parched that he could neither eat, nor drink, nor sleep*. [...] Because I constantly saw him taste water from the tip of his lips, and because I knew that his conduct of life was according to God, *I understood that his illness must have come from the book of the katanyktic kanones that he had recently composed*. By delighting in the words of the book, he had indulged in weeping without restraint⁴.

This testimony indicates that the performance of katanyktic poems could provoke real tears in their performers, and indeed, weeping was actively pursued and highly valued by those engaging in such textual performances⁵. Con-

² I have dealt with these issues in my recent works: Cocola 2021 and 2022; and Cocola 2023 vol. 1, pp. 1-32.

³ BHG 468. Ed. Sargologos 1964. For a general presentation of this text, see Mullett 2004.

⁴ *Vita Cyril. Phil.* 42.9-10: Τοσαυτη δὲ ἦν ἡ κατάνυξις αὐτοῦ ὡς μὴ ἀδείαζειν ἀπ' αὐτῆς σχεδὸν νυκτὸς καὶ ἡμέρας. Συλλέξας γὰρ τῶν ὀκτῶ ἤχων τὰ στιχηρὰ καὶ τοὺς κατανυκτικοὺς κανόνας καὶ ποιήσας βιβλίον οὐκ ἐδίδου ἑαυτῷ ἀνάπαυσιν, ἀλλ' ἦν ψάλλων αὐτὴν νυκτὸς καὶ ἡμέρας μετὰ ζεούσης καρδίας. Ἐντὸς δὲ ὀλίγων ἡμερῶν ἐκ τῆς πολλῆς ἐκχύσεως τῶν δακρῶν οὕτως ἀπεξηράνθη τὸ σῶμα αὐτοῦ, ὡς μὴ δύνασθαι φαγεῖν ἢ πιεῖν ἢ ὑπνῶσαι. [...] Ὡς δὲ ἔβλεπον αὐτὸν συνεχῶς ἀπογευόμενον ἄκροις χεῖλεσιν ὕδατος, εἰδὼς τὴν κατὰ Θεὸν ἐργασίαν αὐτοῦ συνῆκα ὅτι ἐκ τῆς νεωστί ἐγχειρισθείσης βίβλου τῶν κατανυκτικῶν κανόνων συμβέβηκεν αὐτῷ ἡ νόσος διὰ τὸ ἐγγλυκανθῆναι τοῖς ῥήμασιν αὐτῆς καὶ ἐκδοῦναι ἑαυτὸν εἰς ἄμετρον κλαυθμόν. Ed. Sargologos 1964, pp. 200-202.

⁵ In monastic circles, weeping and tears played a fundamental role during ascetic practices

currently, Kataskepenos cautions the reader of his *Life* regarding the potential hazards of excessive compunction, wherein a previously healthy and robust physique may degenerate into a state of frailty and morbidity. The ultimate sequela of such excess may culminate in mortality.

2. The Sting of Compunction

The English term “compunction”, though exhibiting a degree of obsolescence, remains the most suitable translation for the Greek κατάνυξις. Paralleling its Latin cognate “compungo”, the Greek verb κατανύσσω, from which κατάνυξις originates, signifies a piercing or stinging sensation, predominantly affecting the soul or heart of the individual experiencing it⁶. However, a crucial distinction must be drawn. The Byzantine conceptualization of κατάνυξις diverges from the contemporary understanding of “compungo”. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “compungo” denotes «the pricking or stinging of the conscience or heart; regret or uneasiness of mind consequent on sin or wrong-doing; remorse, contrition»⁷. Conversely, within the Byzantine worldview, κατάνυξις encompassed not only regret but also served as an impetus for self-amelioration and soteriological attainment⁸. While the piercing nature of κατάνυξις induces pain (πένθος), it simultaneously fosters repentance (μετάνοια) and facilitates the post-mortem salvation of the soul. Consequently, Byzantines regarded κατάνυξις as a «gift from God»⁹ (Ἡ μὲν τοιαύτη κατάνυξις Θεοῦ ἐστὶ δῶρον) and characterized it as a «blessed joy-grief»¹⁰ (τὴν μακαρίαν χαρμολύπην).

related to repentance. On this point, see Hunt 2004 and Hinterberger 2006. Giannouli 2009 shows the role of katanyktic poems in generating tears of repentance during their performance.

⁶ For a definition of κατανύσσω, see Lampe 1961, p. 713.

⁷ *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. [<https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=compunction>].

⁸ On this issue, Mellas 2020 and Chrysavgis 2002.

⁹ Basil the Great, *Asketikon*, PG 31.1092D: Ἡ μὲν τοιαύτη κατάνυξις Θεοῦ ἐστὶ δῶρον, ἥ εἰς ἐρεθισμὸν τῆς ἐπιθυμίας, ἵνα γευσαμένη ἡ ψυχὴ τῆς γλυκύτητος τοῦ τοιοῦτου πόνου, σπουδάσῃ τοῦτον ἐξομαλίσαι· ἡ εἰς ἀπόδειξιν τοῦ δύνασθαι τὴν ψυχὴν διὰ σπουδαιοτέρας ἐπιμελείας ἐν κατανύξει εἶναι πάντοτε. “Such a compunction is a gift from God in order to stir up desire, so that the soul, having tasted the sweetness of such compunction or sorrow might be stirred up to foster it, or as proof that the soul is able through more zealous application to be always in such compunction”. Translation from Silvas 2005, pp. 282-283.

¹⁰ John Klimakos, *Heavenly Ladder*, PG 88.804B: Κατέχων κάτεχε τὴν μακαρίαν τῆς ὁσίας κατανύξεως χαρμολύπην. “Firmly hold the blessed joy-grief of holy compunction”. On the concept of Byzantine χαρμολύπη, see the recent work by Chilikov 2021. See also the more dated but still valuable study by Hunt 2004.

The emotion of compunction is frequently depicted in literary sources through physical and concrete imagery. A notable description is provided by John Klimakos in his *Heavenly Ladder* (sixth-seventh century)¹¹, wherein κατάνυξις is likened to a golden κέντρον (“spur”), inflicting a piercing sensation upon the sinner’s soul and heart¹². Within the *Apophthegmata Patrum* collections (fifth century), individuals experiencing the sting of κατάνυξις are often portrayed as prostrating themselves in acts of penitence¹³. Subsequent to the onset of compunction, penitent sinners articulate expressions of self-reproach and contrition, often accompanied by tears¹⁴. These narratives of awareness consistently underscore the significant benefit (ὠφέλιμος) accrued by those undergoing such transformative experiences. The piercing effect of κατάνυξις is thus presented as an invaluable advantage for the afflicted.

This phenomenon is also evident within the katanyktic poems themselves. In these texts, the penitent sinner frequently portrays their own heart and soul as obdurate and insensate¹⁵. The piercing effect of κατάνυξις, therefore, functions to perturb the sinner, rousing them from the torpor of sin and instigating repentance (μετάνοια). In the katanyktic kanon composed by Neophytos Enkleistos (1134-1214) – a great exponent of Cypriot monasticism and spiritual literature¹⁶ – sin, personified by the diabolical entity Beliar¹⁷, has inflicted wounds upon the sinner in the form of arrows. The sinner’s soul is described as replete with festering wounds¹⁸. However, due to the inherent obduracy of his soul, the sinner remains insensible to the pain. Consequently,

¹¹ CPG 7852. On the importance and influence of this text in the Byzantine spirituality of later centuries, see Ware 1982, pp. 1-70 and, more recently, Mellas 2020, p. 104 n. 186. The only currently available edition of the *Heavenly Ladder* is that contained in PG 88.632-1209. However, Maxim Venetskov has recently announced the forthcoming publication of a new critical edition of the text based on the Sinaitic manuscript branch in 2026. I also mention here the collectanea edited by Van Deun and Venetskov 2024 on the work of Klimakos.

¹² John Klimakos, *Heavenly Ladder* PG 88.801D: πένθος ἐστὶ κέντρον χρύσειον ψυχῆς πάσης [...]. As noted by Chrysavgis 1985, p. 132 n. 7, although in this passage the author employs the term πένθος (“sorrow”), he is actually implicitly referring to κατάνυξις. In fact, according to Klimakos the feeling of compunction is included in the more generic emotion of πένθος.

¹³ On this point, see the fundamental work by Müller 2000, p. 226. Like Klimakos’ *Ladder*, the collection of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, although dating back to late antiquity, had a great influence in the later Byzantine world, especially in the ascetic sphere. On this collection, its forms and the available critical editions, see Wortley 2013.

¹⁴ Müller 2000, pp. 226-227, offers several examples.

¹⁵ Since the Old and New Testament, sin leads to dryness of heart. Cfr., for instance, Ps 94:8 and Hebrews 3:7.

¹⁶ On the figure of Neophytos and his literary works, see Galatariotou 1991 and Demosthenus 2005.

¹⁷ For the scriptural figure of Beliar in katanyktic poetry, see Cocola 2023, pp. 238-239.

¹⁸ I presented this poem in chapter 3: *The Corpus*. It has been recently edited and translated in Cocola 2025.

he implores Christ to intervene and effectuate the healing of his afflictions. Although *κατάνυξις* is not explicitly mentioned within the text, the therapeutic agent to which the sinner alludes is, in fact, compunction¹⁹:

Τοῖς βέλεσι τιτρώσκει με ὁ Βελίαρ
καὶ μάλιστα ἡδύνομαι ὁ παράφρων.
Ἐσάπησαν οἱ μώλωπες τῆς ψυχῆς μου
90 καὶ οὐκ αἰσθάνομαι
ἀπὸ πωρώσεως.
Σύ, Χριστέ μου, δώρησαι θεῖον φάρμακον.

Beliar wounds me with his arrows
and I, the madman, even delight in them.
The bruises of my soul have putrefied
90 and I do not sense it
because of the hard skin (that grew on it).
Christ, give me a divine medicine.

The sinner is afflicted with *ἀναισθησία* (lit. “lack of sensation”) – v. 90 *οὐκ αἰσθάνομαι* – and consequently requires a piercing stimulus to attain salvation. Analogously, the penitent first-person voice in a *katanyktic* poem by Nikephoros Kallistou Xanthopoulos (1256-1335) proclaims its insensibility, comparing itself to a stone (*λίθος ὡς ἀναισθητος*), and expresses the necessity of tears of compunction to rouse itself from the obduracy of its soul²⁰. In alternative instances, sin is portrayed through the metaphor of profound somnolence,

¹⁹ Indeed, Neophytos inherited this imagery from the *Great Kanon* by Andrew of Crete (seventh-eighth century). In the fifteenth troparion of the VIII ode (ed. PG 97.1377A), which was sung on the Wednesday of the first week of Lent, the sinful ‘I’ of the text invokes Christ as a physician to obtain compunction as a cure: *Τὴν σηπεδόνα, Σωτήρ, θεράπευσον / τῆς ταπεινῆς μου ψυχῆς, μόνε ἱατρέ: / μάλαγμά μοι ἐπίθες / καὶ ἔλαιον καὶ οἶνον, / ἔργα μετανοίας, / κατάνυξιν μετὰ δακρύων.* “Saviour, my only physician, heal / the putrefaction / of my poor soul. / Apply to me a poultice / and oil and wine, / that is works of repentance, / compunction with tears.” On the *katanyktic* *kanon* of Andrew of Crete and its usage during Byzantine Lent, see the works by Krueger 2014 and Mellas 2020.

²⁰ Ed. Jugie 1929/1930, pp. 362-365 (vv. 49-52): *Λίθος ὡς ἀναισθητος γεγονώς, / λόγοις οὐ μαλάσσομαι καθαγνίζουσι, [τὴν] ψυχὴν / πεπώρωμαι· ὅθεν μὴ στένων, μὴ δακρύων, / τίς γένωμαι ὁ τάλας; Κόρη, βοήθει μοι.* “Since I am numb as a stone, / I am not softened by purifying words: I have hardened/my soul. So, without moans or tears, / what is to become of me, the unhappy one? Virgin, help me.” Nikephoros Kallistou Xanthopoulos was an important spiritual figure in thirteenth-fourteenth century Constantinople. His literary production is extensive, both in verse and prose. Six *katanyktic* poems are attributed to him, which I have analysed in Cocola 2023 vol. 1, pp. 113-122. I also devoted a study on the presence of the Psalms in Xanthopoulos’ *katanyktic* production (Cocola forthcoming). On his life and works, see also Antonopoulou (2007).

primarily affecting the ψυχή (“soul”): the puncturing effect of κατάνυξις thus functions to awaken the soul and guide it towards the path of repentance²¹.

3. The Corpus

The selection of katanyktic texts from the Middle and Late Byzantine periods for this study was predicated upon the apogee of katanyktic literature, particularly the production of poetic katanyktic works, during these centuries²². All texts analyzed herein belong to the genre of Byzantine hymnography²³. They comprise two kanones and a hymn in political verse, composed for utilization within primarily monastic contexts of individual or communal prayer²⁴.

The first text is an anonymous katanyktic kanon concerning the *Heavenly Ladder*, likely composed in the early twelfth century²⁵. This hymn is dedicated to the so-called “holy condemned” (ἅγιοι κατάδικοι), the protagonists of the fifth chapter of Klimakos’ *Ladder* (seventh century)²⁶. In this chapter, dedicated entirely to penitence, Klimakos elaborates on a monastic foundation near Alexandria, Egypt, which included a designated penitential confinement, termed “Prison”. The author provides a detailed narrative of the penitents’ existence within this place, with particular emphasis on their corporeal mortifications. The kanon was intended to function as a “model of salvation” (v. 5) for its readership, predominantly monastic. Through the performance of this text, they sought to evoke tears and compunction by meditating upon the suffering and pain endured by the penitent sinners depicted in the *Ladder*²⁷.

The second kanon is a recently edited work by Neophytos Enkleistos²⁸. Notably, this is not the sole katanyktic composition by Neophytos; within his catechetical treatise, *The Book of Fifty Chapters*, are found four additional

²¹ On this point, see Cocola 2023 vol. 1, pp. 317-318.

²² Giannouli 2013.

²³ Studies on Byzantine hymnography are numerous. For a general introduction, see Papaioannou 2021, Giannouli 2019 and D’Aiuto 2004.

²⁴ On Byzantine kanones, in addition to the bibliography cited in the previous footnote, see Frøyskov 2013.

²⁵ The only complete transcription and English translation of the text is that of Martin 1954, pp. 128-145. However, a proper critical edition is still lacking. See also the studies and transcriptions by Barnea 1963 and Avner 1984.

²⁶ The fifth chapter of the *Ladder* has been deeply analysed by Perrone 2019. As noted by Rigo 2008, p. 273, the katanyktic kanon is found added to the *Ladder* in a limited number of manuscripts, mostly from the post-Byzantine era. Despite this, it enjoyed some circulation and was also translated into Slavonic during the fourteenth century.

²⁷ I presented the text in depth, analyzing its content and performance contexts in my recent study: Cocola 2023, pp. 78-81.

²⁸ This figure has been previously presented. See *supra* footnote 18.

katanyktic prayers in verse, which Neophytos prescribes for monastic recitation and chanting to cultivate κατάνυξις²⁹. The kanon under analysis is a first-person supplication addressed to Christ, imploring salvation from eternal condemnation through the bestowal of repentance and compunction³⁰.

The author of the third and final text is Germanos II, patriarch of Constantinople (1223-1240)³¹. He authored a poem comprising seventy-one political verses, organized into six strophes. Each strophe concludes with the recurring refrain, «Eyes, let flow bloody springs of tears», underscoring the significance of tears of compunction within the composition³². In the poem, the penitent first-person voice exhorts the soul to engage in repentance, expressing regret and contrition, particularly through the tangible act of weeping. Within each strophe, commencing with the second, the first-person narrator illustrates to the soul instances of penitent sinners drawn from the Scriptures and, in one instance, from pagan mythology³³.

4. Physical Transformation of the Repentant Sinner

Within katanyktic poetry, the principal focus of the penitent first-person voice (hereafter ‘katanyktic I’)³⁴ is predominantly directed towards the effects of sin and subsequent repentance upon its interiority. The soul, heart, and mind of the ‘I’ constitute the unequivocal protagonists of these texts³⁵. Nevertheless, in

²⁹ In chapter 19 we find a katanyktic poem in anapestic verses (inc. Οἱμοι, οἱμοι, βοήθησον, Κύριε), which is followed by a short katanyktic poem in political verses (Ἐμὲν’ οὐ πρέπει νὰ λαλῶ οὐδὲ νὰ συντοχαίνω). In chapter 22, Neophytos presents two poems in political verses on the theme of the Fall of Adam (Τοῦ παραδείσου τὸ φυτὸν, and Παράδεισε τερπνότετε, ἡ χώρα τῶν δικαίων). These texts have been extensively studied by me in Cocola 2023 vol. 1, pp. 86-94. See also Giannouli 2013, pp. 94-97. *The Book of Fifty Chapters* has been edited by Sotiroudes 1996, pp. 279-289.

³⁰ I have presented the content in detail in Cocola 2023 vol. 1, pp. 93-94.

³¹ On the figure of Germanos, see Talbot 1991, p. 847 and Kubina 2021. His literary works have been listed in Tessari, Migliorini 2012, p. 166, who also edited the katanyktic poem here analyzed.

³² Ρεῖτε δακρύων, ὀφθαλμοί, κρονοὺς ἡματωμένων. For the hymnographic usage of the text, see Tessari, Migliorini 2012, p. 159-161.

³³ The models of repentance that the ‘I’ presents to his soul are: Adam, Joseph, David and the Heliades. I analyzed the text in Cocola 2023 vol. 1, pp. 101-105.

³⁴ I coined this expression to denote the first-person voice in katanyktic poems in my doctoral thesis – see Cocola 2023 vol. 1, pp. 165-178. The ‘katanyktic I’ exhibits distinct characteristics that differentiate it from the first-person voice in other Byzantine texts, such as εἰς ἑαυτὸν poems. Specifically, this ‘I’ is non-autobiographical, neither coinciding with the text’s author nor with specific historical figures. It functions as a communal mouthpiece, allowing any Byzantine faithful to identify with it, akin to the first-person voice in the Psalter – for further discussion, see also Cocola 2022, pp. 177-179. Given that the ‘katanyktic I’ is exclusively masculine in the texts analyzed herein, I will also refer to it in masculine terms.

³⁵ See Cocola 2023 vol. 1, esp. pp. 313-326.

certain instances, the 'katanyktic I' also delineates the corporeal consequences of sin and/or compunction.

In the ensuing analysis, examples have been categorized into specific sections pertaining to: the head and chest of the penitent, his eyes, general somatic effects, and self-inflicted corporal mortifications.

4.1. Head and Chest

The 'katanyktic I' frequently references his posture, which resonates with that of biblical penitents and, more broadly, with the comportment associated with repentance and contrition³⁶. His head is consistently directed towards the earth: cognizant of his transgressions, he abstains from elevating his gaze towards the heaven³⁷. In the twelfth-century katanyktic kanon on the *Heavenly Ladder*, for instance, the penitent sinners utilize the conventional biblical metaphor of sin as an oppressive weight, compelling them to prostrate themselves and precluding any upright stance or upward gaze (vv. 71-75)³⁸. This condition even likens them to beasts³⁹:

Τὰ νῦν οἶφ βάρει
τῶν πταισμάτων δεινῶς πιεζόμεθα·
ὕφ' οὗ κάτω νεύειν
καὶ πρὸς τὴν γῆν ὥσπερ τὰ κτήνη
75 ἀποβλέπειν ἀεὶ βιαζόμεθα.

Now what a great burden of sins
we are terribly burdened with!
That is why we are always forced
to be bowed down
and look at the ground like beasts.

Within the aforementioned kanon, verses 61-64, the penitents depict themselves in the act of shacking and striking their heads, while crying and mourning incessantly:

³⁶ Maguire 1977 devoted a very detailed study to the posture and gestures of sorrow in Middle Byzantine art. There, the author also mentions the emotions of repentance and regret.

³⁷ For examples, see Cocola 2023 vol. 1, p. 209 n. 51.

³⁸ For an in-depth study of the metaphor of sin as a burden in the Bible, see Lam 2016, pp. 16-86. I analyzed this metaphor in katanyktic poetry in my recent work: Cocola 2023 vol. 1, pp. 211-216.

³⁹ See Cocola 2023 vol. 1, p. 2017 n. 42, on the *topos* of the penitent sinner as a beast.

Ῥαθυμία δουλεύσαντες,
στάσεως τῆς κρείττονος ἀπερρίφημεν·
διὸ στένειν οὐ παυσόμεθα,
κεφαλὰς κινοῦντες καὶ κοπτόμενοι.

Subjected to the slavery of indolence,
we have been banished from the most excellent condition:
therefore, we will not cease to groan,
moving and striking our heads.

These gestures are conventionally employed to denote affective states within the domains of repentance and compunction⁴⁰. In katanyktic poetry, such actions frequently resonate with the biblical paradigm established by the publican in the Gospel of Luke⁴¹. One of the preparatory Sundays for the Lenten period (the “Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee”), in the Byzantine liturgical calendar, was entirely dedicated to this Gospel passage. This Sunday marked the beginning of the use of the book called *Triodion Katanyktikon*, a compendium of katanyktic hymns employed in Lenten celebrations to evoke in the faithful sentiments of repentance and contrition⁴². Consequently, it is unsurprising that the ‘katanyktic I’ often alludes to the publican and his contrite demeanor, characterized by a lowered head and a gaze fixed upon the earth, precluded from elevating his eyes towards heaven due to a sense of shame for his transgressions⁴³.

The postures described in the aforementioned passages can also be found in contemporary iconography. Manuscript Vat. gr. 1754 [Diktyon: 68383], which transmits the texts of John Klimakos’ *Heavenly Ladder* and is dated to the

⁴⁰ Note that these acts also indicate sorrow and mourning in Greek funerary rituals and literature, as shown by Alexiou 2002, pp. 55-56, 68-69, and Zanusso 2019, pp. 105-131. For other examples of these gestures in katanyktic poems, see Cocola 2023 vol. 1, pp. 262-263.

⁴¹ The parable of the publican and the Pharisee is narrated by Jesus in Lk 18:9-14. Within the narrative, Christ contrasts the pompous and arrogant attitude of the Pharisee, who believes himself to be perfect and sinless, with the subdued compunction and repentance of the publican, who, aware of his sins, repents before God.

⁴² See Krueger 2014, p. 152 and 169. In the same publication, Krueger also dwells with the presence of the figure of the publican in early katanyktic hymnography (see pp. 195-196, 210-211). For information on the *Triodion*, see Getcha 2012, pp. 35-39, 141-232. Quinlan 1997 and 2004 has dedicated several studies to the manuscript transmission and editorial challenges associated with this liturgical book.

⁴³ Very often, the ‘katanyktic I’ does not merely mention the figure of the publican as an example to follow, but identifies perfectly with it, becoming its alter-ego. On this specific point and, more generally, on the role of biblical characters within katanyktic poetry, see Cocola 2021, pp. 342-344, and Cocola 2023 vol. 1, pp. 327-384.

twelfth century, features a wealth of such illustrations⁴⁴. This codex is particularly pertinent to this study, as it contains the katanyktic kanon concerning the *Ladder* and includes miniatures that faithfully represent the poem's verses⁴⁵. Folios 7v and 8v present depictions corresponding to the verses previously discussed⁴⁶.

4.2. Eyes

Katanyktic poetry frequently centers upon the eyes of the penitent sinner. Considering the paramount significance of tears within this literary genre, this emphasis is unsurprising⁴⁷. Byzantine ascetical treatises, which address repentance and its attendant manifestations, consistently underscore the necessity of genuine tears of remorse as a prerequisite for compunction⁴⁸. A recurrent *topos* in katanyktic poems portrays the impenitent sinner with dry and arid eyes⁴⁹. He beseeches divine intervention to instigate κατάνυξις within his hearts and to facilitate the profusion of tears from his eyes. The incipit of the katanyktic poem by Germanos II (thirteenth century) elaborates upon this literary motif with considerable sophistication:

5 Ὅ παλαι βλύσας ὕδατα πέτρας ἐξ ἀκροτόμου
καὶ τῆς Μερραῖς μεταβαλὼν Ἑβραίοις τὴν πικρίαν,
κοσμοποιέ, τερατουργέ, θεέ μου, πλαστοουργέ μου,
τῶν ἀκροτάτων ἐφετῶν ἀκρότης ὑπερτέρα,
δακρύων δεῖξόν μοι πηγὰς τὰ κύκλα τῶν ὀμμάτων,
τὴν κεφαλὴν μου πλήρωσον ὕδάτων καθαρσίῳ
καὶ ποιήσον τὰ βλέφαρα νεφέλας ἀειρρόους·
ὁ μολυσμὸς γὰρ τῶν φρενῶν καὶ τῆς ψυχῆς ὁ ῥύπος
ὕσώπου δεῖται, δέσποτα, τῆς σῆς φιλανθρωπίας

⁴⁴ This manuscript is described by Canart 1970, pp. 47-51.

⁴⁵ Martin 1954 devoted his entire study on the miniatures that accompany the text of the *Ladder* and that of the katanyktic kanon.

⁴⁶ The two miniatures are available at the following link: https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.gr.1754.

⁴⁷ On the *topos* of tears in katanyktic poetry, see Cocola 2023 vol. 1, pp. 255-285.

⁴⁸ Hunt 2004, p. xi and Hinterberger 2006, pp. 33-34. I also add the study by Müller 2000, pp. 136-39 and 162-165, on the connection between mourning and κατάνυξις in Byzantine monastic literature.

⁴⁹ See, for instance, the kanon on the *Heavenly Ladder*, vv. 133-137, with reference to John 4:14: Ἀλλομένου καὶ ζώντος / οἱ τὸ πρὶν πεπλησμένοι / εἰς κόπον ὕδατος, / ἐκείνου ξηρανθέντος / ἡμῶν τῇ ῥαθυμίᾳ. "Once we were filled with / the springing and living water / till satiety / but it has dried up / by our negligence." See also the katanyktic kanon by Neophytos Enkleistos, vv. 77-78: τὰ δάκρυα ἐψύγησαν τῶν ὀμμάτων/ἐμοῦ. "The tears of my eyes have dried up."

- 10 κάκ τῆς πηγῆς τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν καρδιακῶν ὑδάτων.
 Ρεῖτε δακρύων, ὀφθαλμοί, κρουνοὺς ἡματωμένους.
- You, who once drew water from a very hard stone
 and changed the bitterness of Mara for the Jews,
 Creator of the world, worker of miracles, my God, my creator,
 You who are the highest among the highest desires,
- 5 let the sockets of my eyes become sources of tears,
 fill my head with purifying waters
 and turn my eyelids into ever-raining clouds.
 For the defilement of my mind and the sordidness of my soul
 need the hyssop of Your mercy, Lord,
- 10 and the waters of the heart that gush forth from the fountain of the eyes.
 Eyes, let flow bloody springs of tears!

To substantiate his petition, the sinner invokes two biblical episodes involving Moses, thereby appealing to both the Lord's remembrance and the reader's cognizance. Firstly, he references the event wherein Moses miraculously procured water from the arid landscape (cfr. Exod 17:6, Deut 8:15, Ps 113:8). Subsequently, he recalls Moses' miraculous transformation of the bitter, and hence, undrinkable waters of Mara's spring into potable liquid (Exod 15:23). The 'katanyktic I' draws a parallel between his own condition and the desert's stones, owing to the obduracy of his heart and the aridity of his eyes, and also between his soul and the waters of Mara, due to its bitterness stemming from sin's corruption. Consequently, he entreats God to replicate these miracles, causing a similar effluence of tears from his eyes and inundating his cranium with purifying waters to expunge his defilement (vv. 5-6). These verses also resonate with another biblical passage, Jer 8:23, wherein the prophet articulates a sorrowful lament concerning a desert famine⁵⁰. The 'I' provides a detailed elaboration of his supplication, eschewing generic references to the eyes and instead meticulously delineating each constituent part. The ocular sockets are to become sources of tears (v. 5), and the eyelids, nimbus-like formations (v. 7). In verses 7-11, the 'I' further develops his plea for God to bestow cleansing tears, alluding to Ps 50: the stain of sin that has sullied the soul and mind requires the hyssop of divine mercy (Ps 50:9) and tears gushing from the fountains of the eyes⁵¹. Of particular relevance to this study is verse 11, which functions as

⁵⁰ τίς δώσει κεφαλῇ μου ὕδωρ καὶ ὀφθαλμοῖς μου πηγὴν δακρύων. "Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears!"

⁵¹ ῥαντιεῖς με ὑσσώπῳ, καὶ καθαρισθήσομαι· πλυνεῖς με, καὶ ὑπὲρ χιόνα λευκανθήσομαι. "You will sprinkle me with hyssop, and I shall be cleansed; you will wash me, and I shall wither than snow."

a refrain, concluding each strophe (“Eyes, let flow bloody springs of tears!”). Here, the ‘I’ implores his eyes to emit “springs” of tears. This phraseology also echoes Jer 8:23, mirroring verses 5 and 6. The imagery of tears, both copious like a torrent and sanguineous, serves to vividly depict the desired compunction. The reference to blood likely alludes to the fact that the eyes, after much weeping, become so red that they appear to be bleeding⁵².

4.3. Body and Corporal Punishments

The sinner, having experienced the piercing sensation of compunction, adopts a posture of supplication, kneeling and prostrating themselves before God⁵³. In the opening verses of Neophytos Enkleistos’ poem (twelfth-thirteenth century), the ‘katanyktic I’ exhorts his soul to engage in tears and prostration before Christ, mirroring his own corporeal actions, as if the soul possessed independent limbs for genuflection⁵⁴: «Come, soul, / let us weep with much compunction, / come, let us prostrate ourselves before Christ»⁵⁵.

Within katanyktic poetry, the penitent is typically depicted as exhibiting physical debility. Their somatic state is characterized by profound fragility and enervation, attributable to both the metaphorical malady of sin and the implemented penitential practices. Indeed, the experience of compunction is invariably coupled with the acknowledgment of personal transgressions, thereby instigating within the penitent’s soul a desire to manifest outwardly to the divine the attainment of *κατάνυξις* and repentance. For instance, in the katanyktic kanon concerning the *Heavenly Ladder* (twelfth century), the sinners perceive themselves as unworthy of the human condition due to the magnitude of their transgressions (vv. 97-103). Consequently, they resolve to impose self-punishment by abstaining from human sustenance and instead subsisting on ashes, a quintessential symbol of repentance, and ingesting their own tears:

Ἀνάξιοι τῆς τρυφῆς
τῆς τοῦ κυρίου γενόμενοι

⁵² The editors of the text also believe that behind this image is the ancient and medieval theory that tears are a secretion of blood and pneuma. See Tessari, Migliorini 2012, p. 174 with the bibliography cited there.

⁵³ Cfr. the katanyktic kanon by Neophytos Enkleistos (twelfth-thirteenth c.), v. 39: νυνὶ προσπίπτω σοι. “I now prostrate myself before You (i.e. Christ)”, and vv. 341-342: Συντετριμμένη τῇ ψυχῇ / καὶ καρδίᾳ ταπεινῇ προσπίπτομέν σοι. “With a broken soul / and with a wretched heart we prostrate ourselves before You (i.e. Christ).”

⁵⁴ On this frequent rhetorical figure, see Cocola 2023 vol. 1, p. 280.

⁵⁵ Vv. 1-3: Δεῦρο, ψυχῇ, κλαύσωμεν ἐν κατανύξει πολλῇ, / δεῦρο Χριστῷ προσπέσωμεν.

100 δι' ἡδονὴν βλαβεράν,
τὸ πόμα τοῖς δάκρυσιν
κινῶμεν οἱ δειλαιοί,
καὶ σποδὸν ὡς ἄρτον
ἐπαξίως νῦν σιτούμεθα.

Having become unworthy
of the Lord's delight
because of our baleful pleasures,
we, unfortunate as we are, mix
drink with tears
and now with good reason eat
ashes as bread.

The aforementioned reference demonstrably alludes to Psalm 101:10, a psalm of lamentation, wherein the anguished supplication of an afflicted and defiant individual to God is articulated⁵⁶. Within the same kanon, immediately following the verses previously cited, the penitent sinners also delineate the somatic consequences of protracted weeping and enforced abstinence (vv. 104-110). They meticulously detail their desiccated and dehydrated skin – a potsherd-like skin (ὄστρακον) – which adheres to their bones:

105 Ἴσχυς ἡ πᾶσα ἡμῶν
ὡς ὄστρακον ἀπεξήραται,
καὶ τὰ ὀστά τῇ σαρκὶ
εἰς τέλος κεκόλληται·
110 ἀπὸ τοῦ βαρύτατα
καὶ ἐκ βάθους στένειν
καὶ πενθεῖν τὰ παραπτώματα.

All our strength
dried up like a shard,
and our bones have finally
clung to the flesh
from the very heavy
and deep groaning
and from grieving over errors.

⁵⁶ ὅτι σποδὸν ὥσει ἄρτον ἔφαγον καὶ τὸ πόμα μου μετὰ κλαυθμοῦ ἐκίρνων. "Because I ate ashes like bread / and would mix my drink with weeping."

The author of this anonymous kanon, once more, draws upon the vast repository of the psalms to depict the tribulations of penitents⁵⁷.

The katanyktic kanon concerning the *Heavenly Ladder* is a text notably replete with allusions to corporeal mortifications inflicted by penitents upon themselves. This is attributable to its utilization within monastic settings, as previously mentioned, where self-punitive penitential practices were prevalent⁵⁸. In verses 125-132, to induce compunction, or “fervor of the heart”, the penitent sinners subject themselves to frigid conditions and tremble, consumed by glacial cold:

Τῆς τοῦ πνεύματος θερμῆς
 ἐαντοὺς ἀβουλίᾳ
 νοὸς στερήσαντες,
 ἐκτῆζωμεν τὰς σάρκας
 τῷ κρύει καὶ παγετῷ,
 130 αἰεὶ ταλαιπωρούμενοι.
 Εἴ πως τὴν ζέσιν αὐθις
 εὕρωμεν τῆς καρδίας.

Since we have deprived ourselves
 of the fervor of the Spirit
 through thoughtlessness of mind,
 let us consume our flesh
 in cold and ice,
 while suffering continuously:
 perhaps in this way we can find
 the fervor of the heart again.

Given that the sinners, through their transgressions, have forfeited the internal “warmth” of heart and soul – θερμῆς (v. 125) and ζέσιν (v. 131), both belonging to the semantic domain of heat – their self-imposed penance manifests as exposure to frigidity. The internal chill mirrors the corporeal coldness they endure.

⁵⁷ Cfr. Ps 21:16 (ἐξηράνθη ὡς ὄστρακον ἡ ἰσχὺς μου. “My strength was dried up like a potsherd”) and Ps 101:6 (ἀπὸ φωνῆς τοῦ στεναγμοῦ μου ἐκολλήθη τὸ ὅστούν μου τῇ σαρκί μου. “Due to the sound of my groaning, my bone clung to my flesh”).

⁵⁸ See the recent volume on Byzantine monasticism edited by Alice-Mary Talbot 2025, especially pp. 1-15, and the bibliography cited there. I also refer to the dated, but still valid, study by Talbot 1987.

5. Concluding remarks

Within katanyktic poetry, the penitent first-person voice also delineates the somatic effects of compunction and repentance. The penitents' heads are consistently oriented towards the earth, abstaining from elevating their gaze towards the celestial realm, thereby emulating the exemplary biblical penitents, and their bodies are engaged in perpetual genuflection. Particular emphasis is placed upon the penitents' eyes, which are desiccated by sin but transformed into perpetual sources of tears by *κατάνυξις*. This analysis has underscored the pivotal role of the Scriptures, particularly the Psalter, in providing imagery and linguistic constructs for the representation of the compunction-afflicted body within katanyktic poems. Indeed, since the nascent centuries of Christianity, believers have drawn upon biblical texts for vocabulary, *topoi*, and literary motifs to articulate their affective states, encompassing sorrow, compunction, repentance, and joy⁵⁹.

Unlike purely literary compositions, katanyktic poems were intended for performative enactment: the recitation of these poetic prayers aimed to evoke genuine compunction within the souls and bodies of their users. Seldom does language so directly translate into action as in the case of katanyktic poetry. There, words become emotion.

Abbreviations

BHG = *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca*

CPG = *Clavis Patrum Graecorum*

NETS = *A New English Translation of the Septuagint*

PG = *Patrologiae cursus completus. Series graeca*

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⁵⁹ On the influence of the psalms on Byzantine hymnography, see D'Aiuto 2004, pp. 270-271, Harvey 2017, pp. 199-218 and Wickes 2019. See also the forthcoming volume on the poetical value of the psalms in Byzantium and their presence in Byzantine poetry edited by Bernard et al.

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