NATURE-TRANSCENDENCE AND SELF-NATURE RELATIONS IN SANDOR WEÖRES'S POEMS

LÁSZLÓ SZILÁRD SZILVESZTER1

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ABSTRACT. *Nature-Transcendence and Self-Nature Relations in Sándor Weöres's Poems.* In Sándor Weöres's poems flora and fauna are not only a decoration, serving as an allegorical/metaphorical background for the representation of the self's alienation and for the 20th century experience of a chaotic universe, but rather the reality of beings independent of subjective consciousness. This reality carries the already forgotten mysteries of the created world, and it definitely points towards a transcendent meaning, an ultimate goal. This paper examines how the specific relationship between self and nature can be associated with the peculiar worldview and the transcendental experiences of Weöres's poetry.

Keywords: Hungarian poetry, 20th century literature, time and eternity, nature, faith

REZUMAT. *Relațiile dintre natură-transcendență și eu-natură în lirica lui Sándor Weöres.* În poeziile lui Sándor Weöres flora și fauna nu sunt doar un fel de decor, un fundal alegoric/metaforic care servește la reprezentarea alienării eului, la experiența unui univers haotic al secolului XX, ci mai degrabă realitatea entităților independente de conștiința subiectivă, o realitate care poartă în ea însăși secretele uitate ale Creației și care indică, în mod evident, spre un scop final, un sens transcendent. Lucrarea de față, examinează modul în care relația dintre eu și natură poate fi legată de viziunea specifică asupra lumii și experiențele transcendentale ale acestei lirici.

Cuvinte-cheie: poezie maghiară, literatura secolului 20, timp și eternitate, natură, credință

¹ László Szilárd SZILVESZTER (PhD), associate professor, Babeş-Bolyai University, author of four monographs and numerous scientific articles in the domain of cultural sciences and especially modern and contemporary East-European (Hungarian) literature. Member of the Romanian Writers' Union and International Association of Hungarian Studies. Email: laszlo.szilveszter@ubbcluj.ro.

1. Introduction

In Sándor Weöres's poetry,² one is both a character and a spectator of God's glorious, eternal theater (*Theatrum Glorige Dei*), Due to our mortality, we are part, but by our consciousness of death and faith in salvation, we are also external observers of the pre- and extra-human dimensions. Flora and fauna in this poetry can, in a way, counterbalance the modern-day problematic nature of the basic relationship between existence and the individual, for in spite of all suffering or doubt, they indicate the existence of an unknown harmony, a sacred unity (See: Schein 2001, 74-75; Bartal 2014, 150-181). Perhaps it is no exaggeration to say that this particular connection to the transcendent can be noticed in the titles of the following volumes: *A kő és az ember* [The Stone and the Man]; *A* teremtés dicsérete [The Praise of Creation]: A hallaatás tornva [The Tower of Silence]; *Tűzkút* [Well of Fire]; *Ének a határtalanról* [Song about the Boundless], etc. As Zoltán Kenveres says in his monograph regarding the first period of Weöres's poetry: for Sándor Weöres "the poem was not meant to be a means of personal self-expression, but of general expression of existence; he did not wish to capture the evanescent miracles of experience, but sought the signals of the cosmos that united man and nature; he searched the non-variable against the accidental; instead of the once-appearing, he wanted to seize the ever-present; and the certainty or, even, the uncertainty of final things sparked his imagination" (Kenveres 2013, 84). The world of minerals, through its impassive indifference, stillness, and absolute submissiveness urges one to greater sobriety; the plants fulfill the purpose of their earthly existence in the task of incessant growth and fecundity, whereas the destructive fight of the animals as part of an existing but inscrutable wholeness and universal meaning reminds us of the necessity of birth and death.

2. Sándor Weöres's Sacral Ecophilosophy

Nature, even despite its vulnerability and ignorance, is happier and wiser, and by virtue of its instinctive control is more open than us. So, the opportunity

² Sándor Weöres (1913-1989) was one of the greatest Hungarian poets of the 20th century. His first poems appeared when he was fourteen; he burst on the Hungarian literary scene possessing a talent which enabled him to write in a wide range of techniques and metric forms. Some of his poems have been set to music and translated to many languages. Beside Christianity, he studied several ancient cultures and mythologies, and discovered Eastern philosophy. "Weöres handled Hungarian folk rhythms with as much ease and elegance as any Latin or Greek meter or other western European verse form. He left a legacy which, in terms of formal virtuosity, is very hard to surpass. [...] His search for meaning constantly led him into the area of metaphysics" (Makkai, and Watson Liebert 2003, 917).

arises: making human life more meaningful and perfect with analogies taken from the living world, getting to know its significance as profoundly as it is given to a mortal. In such a context, the relationship of animals and plants to Creation and the Creator is unproblematic, humans are the only beings who, in the constant struggle between body and spirit, in the contradiction of earthly and spiritual determination, open the way to the duality between faith and denial, joy and suffering, the stubborn will to live and the desire to die. This idea is present in Weöres's poetry from the beginning, for example in the 1938 poem *A kakuk* [The Cuckoo]:

Alien lives are buzzing around me, alien's the nest where I was increased and when my little wings changed there fluff, I turned away from every company, I have no nest, no trouble, no delight, I have nothing to do with anything: and while desires, wishes flutter, until my death I'm but a spectator, so let no one see me until I die.

The moral of being a cuckoo is essential for a person seeking the purpose of life: it means staying away form the hustle and bustle, the petty, lamentable everyday life of the (bird) world: it means contemplation, non-commitment, rejection of all that could interfere with this harmony provided by detachment, the experience of supreme wholeness and love. This aesthetic-philosophical attitude is not unfamiliar to the poetry of the era; it is present in both Attila lózsef's and Lőrinc Szabó's reflective poems. What makes Weöres's approach different from similar lyrical representations between the two world wars is the confident conclusion, even in its ironic overtones, that all this is not the result of world chaos, or of some fatal error, but rather it belongs to the essence and truth of Creation, and that is the way it is supposed to be, for it serves a final, transcendent meaning: "Great law stretches over the grass and tree / feeding us with each other happily / and it's called: love and fondness. / (Is it bad? Don't think so: / you don't know / its goals)." In a letter addressed to Lajos Filep, Sándor Weöres describes this belief as follows: "The greatest accomplishment of my life is that I've got this far: I've never thought that the sight of life, from above, is so infinitely beautiful; it is no longer a problem here why so much confusion must exist if in its entirety life is so undisturbed. Seen from here, even the filthiest things are not scary anymore, because their authenticity, their affiliation is obvious. And the most amazing thing is that I feel how effortless it is to love everything, without distinction and gradation. [...] Those who, one by one, fight and kill each other, together are almost as great a bonfire of love as the Creator Himself" (Kenyeres 2003, 93).

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Perhaps the greatest horror for the thinking and sensitive person. aware of the inevitability of death, is the cruelty of the humans who kill to eat and that of the wild animals that feed on and destroy each other, as well as the indifference of nature to all the pain and suffering that can be observed in the functioning of the – seemingly self-serving – all-overriding survival instinct. This issue is one of the origins of Sándor Weöres's poetry – as a recurring motif. albeit in a changing form and with different conclusions, constantly emerges in each period of his oeuvre. The quoted text of *The Cuckoo* solves this problem with a dispassionate, distant, contemplative attitude, by consciously – and somewhat cynically – accepting that the cuckoo in the poem passes the burden of parental care and species preservation on to the despised noisy bird world. The poem De profundis, written in 1942, depicts the suffering of the "horrible feast", the endless, infernal cycle of killing for life by extending it to the whole world: "where God's cattle and flowers / crowd chewing, alive, each other."³ At the same time, it is obvious that all this has some meaning only for man, the thinking self. *Heraclitus* [Herakleitos], written five years earlier, attributes this universal pain to the limited subjective experience and narrow individualistic worldview:⁴

Don't say that life is bad and God is bad. Don't beg Him for pleasantness. His world is not a lukewarm puddle of happiness

[...]

Just because you didn't get to fill your stomach, it is a shame you call the world vicious: you are for it, not the world for you.

In Weöres's poetry, before the Second World War, to the mystery of the eternal cycle of the birth and death of living beings, the words of the 79th poem of the *Rongyszőnyeg* [Rag-carpet] provide the most authentic answer: suffering is an ineradicable part of life: "[the] suffering of birth, life, and death – says Ellen Gorsevski in a similar context – are parts of every sentient being's existence. Thus, to aid another sentient being by preventing or alleviating suffering is a moral imperative" (Gorsevski 2018, 90). The seed of the grass, the fruit of the tree, the birth of animals, and human creation, all evolve at the cost of the pain of change. Therefore, the purpose of life is not happiness but fertility, participation in the constant work of God, the possibility of merging into the

³ As Donna J. Haraway says: "Try as we might to distance ourselves, there is no way of living that is not also a way of someone, not just something, else dying differentially" (Haraway 2008, 80).

⁴ From the recent scientific literature, Gábor Schein's short monograph and, in more detail, Mária Bartal's book analyze the impact of Heraclitus' fragments, published by the Stemma publisher, with Béla Hamvas' accompanying study, on Weöres' poetry before the Second World War, though neither Schein nor Bartal quote specific passages from the contemporaneous translation. (Cf. Schein 2001, 49; Bartal 2014, 155-157).

never-ending act of creation. In this view, human suffering is far more sublime than that of plants or animals, since it has been given to us to share in the infinity of the whole, in eternity, not only in the particular and momentary: "Now as bonfire consumes the twig / so you are received into God's suffering – it's not a finite pain of a slaughtered hen / but as boundless as a fertile land." The poem *Aurora combattans* shows the same goal in the form of constant movement, birth and decay, struggle, and self-sacrifice. The dynamism of the octosyllabic, two-beat verses, the elevated, archaic diction, the allegorical representation, and the peculiar metaphors evoke the hymns of the Christian antiquity, early Middle Ages, as well as those composed by Aurelius Prudentius Clemens and St. Ambrose:

It is foolish to ask You for heavenly and earthly joy happiness is never the main goal, never the aim but only a repose.

Your Entirety is lasting only if all parts are changing. Not stillness is to be achieved: let everything move that lives.

"In Weöres's worldview", Jenő Alföldy says, "the permanent, the unchanging, the immovable, the eternal is identical with the all-encompassing essence, the manifestation of which is all that changes. Change is the most characteristic feature of the Universe, but while everything changes in the macrocosmic world of the starry sky, just as in the microcosmos of the corpuscles, the totality of changes does not alter the common essence that can be found in everything, namely eternity" (Alföldy 2014, 18).

3. Paradoxes of Eternity

Phenomena considered eternal on the human scale of time, but in fact transient, or seemingly momentary, yet permanent – this is a paradox that appears in Sándor Weöres's several poems. Probably, the best known of these is *Öröklét* [Eternity], in which the poet contrasts the eternity of the apparently forgotten experience, of the event experienced, of the once happened "lizard's creep" or "stroke of wings" with the temporal nature of the material world doomed to annihilation sooner or later in cosmic time, of the celestial bodies or even of the "grave devouring everything" (*Trans. Katalin Ullrich N.*). This view can be found in the early poems, as well. It is about emphasizing the radical difference between appearance and reality, materialism and transcendence, about that existential and at the same time aesthetic-philosophical attitude so characteristic

to Weöres, which, by contrasting sacredness with rationality, definitely decides in favor of the former:

What you don't trust to stone and decay, shape out of the air. A moment leaning out of time arrives here and there

[...]

As a bather's thigh is brushed by skimming fish – so there are times when God is in you... (*Örök pillanat* [Eternal Moment] – *trans. Edwin Morgan*)⁵

The Háromrészes ének [Song in Three Parts], or by its later title, Harmadik szimfónia [Third Symphony], continues this line of thought through the representation of the duality between the above and below, heavenly and earthly, eternal and momentary. The poem, even with regard to Weöres's poetry, has an exceptional structure; it is a three-pillar construction, with musically recurring motifs, variations, and refrains. In the experimenting lightness of the poem, dynamism and abrupt stops, joy and pain, vulnerability and power, birth and death are present simultaneously. The weight of eternity is antagonized by fragile beauty; permanence by movement; quietness by singing; timeless and unchanging divine contemplation by active existence: "Little bird cries, little bird rejoices, / while from his red planks / the mighty one looks down -" (Trans. Susanna Fahlström). As silence carries music, as calmness carries motion, so the intransient, that is the Creator, carries the transient, the never-ceasing spectacle of the created world. In this way, the seemingly different things are essentially one ("You yourself are the hunter and the wild"): the self, the individual dissolves in the process that gives the unity of the Universe. "On the way to completeness, there is no good and bad any more; here, basically, everything belongs to the good already, but the dual perspective remains vivid. In the dimension of completeness/incompleteness, all value choices are guided by an ethical principle, the aesthetic values of poetry appear on the 'back' of this moral imperative", as Zoltán Kenveres puts it about the Song in Three Parts. (Kenveres 2013, 308).

Nature, here, resonates to the vibrations of the human soul; feelings find their match in animal sounds, movements, dance and singing as a projection of the dream-like, surreal, inner world. The recurrent refrain, the different variations

⁵ All the poems with the translators mentioned above are cited from A. Makkai, and E. Watson Liebert, 2003.

reflect this perfect harmony, the coexistence of man and nature: "The peacock screams with you / toddles into the night with you / the rambling rose looses its elongated line with you." A play of opposites and parallels intertwine the lines of the poem, the alternation of strength and weakness, action and tranquility, fortissimo and piano, which, however, are not mutually exclusive. "In the *Song in Three Parts*, the living being becomes an existing one; this metamorphosis of the lyrical hero is the mystery of the birth of the complete person. But in life, Weöres also finds this person: in the nun who adds herself to her nine bags as the tenth, which means that she herself is an object. In life, the complete person considers him- or herself identical with everything, is, in fact, an object among other objects. This is where the purpose of this philosophy of life becomes apparent", Imre Bata notes in connection with the poem (Bata 1979, 98).

4. Man and Nature

After the Second World War, Weöres wrote a number of long verses (See: Bartal 2014, 182-319). Beside poems dealing with various mythological themes (e.g. Mahruh veszése [The Fall of Mahruh], Medeia [Medea], Minotauros [Minotaurus], Orpheus [Orpheus], etc.). Az elveszített napernyő [The Lost Parasol] is primarily significant because in it the poet doesn't build directly on ancient Greek or Far Eastern traditions and characters, but chooses an ordinary idyllic story as a starting point. By this, in some sense, he realizes the aesthetic-philosophical synthesis of the entire oeuvre. The poem itself consists of nearly 400 lines. According to Attila Tamás, the author of the first short monograph on Weöres, "it shows a stylized worldview one degree more naive than the real one" (Tamás 1978, 92). The essence of the epic thread is the parasol left in the midst of the woods as a memento of a rendezvous in nature. Its further "fate" reveals the secrets of existence and nature, birth and death. The object lost in the woods acts as an alien body in the natural world. Beyond the factors motivated by practical use, it can, like any other man-made product, be understood as a metaphor for temporary protest against the chaos that prevails in the universe (See: Derrida 2008, 11-18).

Sándor Weöres's poetry constantly reflects on the perfection and incomprehensibility of divine work, but also on its infinite righteousness and goodness. In the process of creation, mortal man seeks to approach the beauty and orderliness of the created world. This analogy is underlined in the poem by a detour which, as a story in the story, details the fabric and origin of the parasol, and the difficulties of producing it. In most cases, therefore, even making such an easy-to-use tool as a parasol presupposes aesthetic purposes: "Lombard silk and red Rhine dye, / long-travelled Indian ivory, / Pittsburgh iron, Brazilian wood, how / many handcarts have trundled its parts, they have gone by rail, they have gone in boats: / a world to make it! son of a thousand hands!" (*Trans. Edwin Morgan*)

The parasol represents the man-made twentieth-century living space, global civilization (See: Páli 2017, 127-138). The poem places this next to the created world, the mountains, the valleys, the animals, and the plants. Perhaps it is no coincidence, either, that due to its functionality, it protects man from one of nature's vital sources: sunlight.

The story also proves that the artificial and the natural world are not completely alien to each other. The man-made order, which is fulfilled in the making of the tool, apparently prioritizes the victory of entropy during the process of disintegration, but as plants and animals slowly take possession of the now defunct object, the law of love is finally able to rule over chaos (See: Kabdebó 2019, 27-32). The initial distance between the two worlds, created at the moment the parasol is left in the woods, irrevocably disappears with its disintegration. We can witness the new life, sprouting in the shelter of the parasol, overcoming destruction and death:

The vapour-tulip throws back its head, a glass-green other-worldly meadow glistens, at the horizon a purple thorn gathers; darkness surrounds the far-off island; a little ray like a woman's glance flickers, caresses its fugitive lover, glitters as it flutters onto its drowsy son, while a smile dawns eternity on man, its arches bend and march on their way between watery shores, Theatrum Gloriae Dei. *(Trans. Edwin Morgan)*

From such a perspective, everything is full of play and ease. Eternity, salvation exists in the moment. The beauty and fragility of small things, their vulnerability, the infinite love that culminates in the tiniest manifestations of life, overwhelm all destructive forces. The Universe works as God's theater, it is only necessary to recognize that its purpose is to be found not in the individual but in the greater whole. "Nothingness identified with the Universe has nothing to do with nihilism", Jenő Alföldi remarks. "It merely refers to the fate of Something or Someone perpetually transforming into something or someone else in the continual process of changing; everything that returns into the Universe turns again into Something, Someone else until the end of time. This is not about reincarnation. It is simply the disconnection of individual existence and its return into the eternal cycle. But Weöres identifies this with the love that pervades the Universe, which is both a Buddhist and a Christian trait" (Alföldy 2014, 21).

And indeed, *The Lost Parasol*'s last verse is the apotheosis of faith and love that conquer all, similar to the envoi of Attila József's well-known poem

Óda [Ode]. Despite its hidden irony, it has a hopeful ending, since it proclaims the affirmation of life. The image of the oriole here, like in the refrain of the *Song in Three Parts*, where a little bird sings about its joys and sorrows, is an expression of innocence and unconditional aesthetic service. The bird exists, because its existence has a purpose, a meaning, it contributes to the beauty of the Universe, to the fulfillment of a never-ending creation. "Now I expend my life exultantly / like the oriole in the tree: / till it falls down on the old forest floor / singing with such full throat its heart might burst and soar." *(Trans. Edwin Morgan)*

5. Aspects of dehumanization

In contrast to the playfulness of *The Lost Parasol*, the depiction of subhuman beings in Weöres's poetry after the Second World War is often related to alienation or disillusionment with the 20th century society. Excessive rationalism, the dehumanizing effect of technical civilization, or a reality deprived of all the possibilities of transcendence under the guise of modern science appear with cruel irony in the poems of the 50s and 60s.

Did we evolve from the ape? I don't know – but we're turning into monkeys: the bond that ties us to the angels is already broken *(Elérünk olyan józanságot..* [We Achieve Such Sobriety...])

Beside irony, however, in Weöres's poetry, the human person turning (back) into a monkey, the grotesque idea of (de-)evolution is much more than a simple metaphor. A close friend and master of the poet, Nándor Várkonyi, in his book *Sziriat oszlopai* [The Pillars of Seiris], to which Weöres made translations of *Gilgamesh* in 1937 and 1938, outlines, based on Edgar Dacqué's theory and the old myths of mankind, the possibility of another, somewhat reversed, evolutionary history (See: Várkonyi 1990, 113-116). Várkonyi speaks of a specific (de)formation, (d)evolution of the ancient type of man over time, which, as a final moment, can forecast the tragic spiritual decline of the Homo sapiens into the animal world.⁶

⁶ In the first edition of the volume, Várkonyi tries to support Dacqué's arguments, which are undoubtedly outdated from a scientific point of view, concerning the changes in the various forms of the human species with several mythological quotations: "Saxo Grammaticus almost literally repeats Native American legends: 'Before time, there were three types of humans: horrible-looking people, robust people, and giants. Then, there were high-spirited people who had the ability to see the truth and to prophesy. Then, ordinary people came. They no longer possessed the skills of the former ones: the art to change their own shape and deceive people's eyes. Yet, they defeated the others, wiped them out, and became masters of the Earth'" (Várkonyi 1942, 282). "The legends of

Such a view is evidenced by the train of thoughts in Weöres's cycle of poems, comprising 49 pieces, *Én, a határtalan szellem* [I, the Boundless Spirit], written in the 1940s, which makes it clear that the final destruction of modern man, who is moving further and further away from the sources of sacredness, and that of a brutal society, have so far been prevented only by the growth of divine grace: "God's infinite patience has / descended to the lowest degree / Because between the grinding millstones no one can turn right or left [...] He looks at those who have been deprived of their minds / who kill without reason, / not with anger but with a smile, // like at fighting animals."

Here, too, it is formulated the following sentence: eating meat is nothing but an unnatural act of violence against the animal world. This idea can also be related to the statement in *The Pillars of Seiris* that in ancient times, mankind switched to eating meat only out of necessity (Várkonyi 1942, 163).

In Várkonyi's view, technical development and culture, body and spirit, the emotional, imaginative, and intellectual sides of man are in conflict with each other; the over-fulfillment of one dimension always brings about the atrophy of the other. According to him, while the ancient prehistoric peoples were ruled by transcendental relations, European society, which follows in the footsteps of the Greeks, is more obsessed with the material world, although humans differ from animals only in their openness to sacredness, advanced imagination, and emotional connections, thereby are able to transcend the limits of their earthly existence. "In the process that creates civilization", as the afterword of the first edition of The Pillars of Seiris states, "intellectual abilities are predominant, whereas in the cultural activity, the emotional and imaginative ones. The latter are undoubtedly superior; the distance that separates them from the animal's imaginative and emotional abilities is greater than the difference between animal and human intellect [...]. Man is primarily a religious being; that is what makes us human" (Várkonyi 1942, 293-294). The 20th century modern, rationalist society seems to have lost this state of existence and mind forever. According

the ancient peoples convincingly show the Tertiary origin of culture before the Flood; the great instructors appear as gods and demigods (Chon, Oannes, Thot), and as kings, princes (Kenan, Xisuthros, etc.). [...] The new race, the 'ordinary', that is, the later dominant, wild, uncultivated, plebeian man is remembered with similar precision; our Quaternary grandfather. The traditions mentioned earlier also talk about them: they are disciples of the crawling demigods. The Jewish myth says with objective honesty: 'In Enoch's time, humans became like monkeys'" (285). "So, here are the myths telling a whole little story of evolutionary development that strikingly matches the latest findings in physiology: the first phase is the representative of the fearsome, giant animal-like, forehead-eyed creature, the reptile and amphibian human tribe, as we call it: the Proto-homo; then comes the Tertiary man, with an elongated head, webbed fingers, with demonic powers and magic science, the Homo Magus; and finally, the small, uncultivated but sensible, diligent, and prolific 'ordinary' Homo Faber" (287).

to the testimony of Weöres's two emblematic lines, the only refuge for the individual seeking the purposes of Creation, from which sacredness can probably still be reconstructed, is the reestablishment of the connection with the prehuman and extrahuman dimensions, the rejection of self-glorification: "My friends are the / animals and the superhuman currents" (*Elhagyott dimenziók* [Abandoned Dimensions]).

In one of his late poems, *Natura*, however, this possibility is no longer given: the prehuman sphere, which could provide shelter, seems to be severely compromised, as well; and the cold indifference of the rationally more and more known and "possessed" cosmos brings the inevitable threat of fear of chaos, of final destruction, as a kind of "gift" to man. Thus, everything is just a sham and a lie: the unthinking, unconscious bliss of nature as well as the illusory security of non-existence in minerals.

The punches of the sky are red wounds in the heart, everything writhes under the hammers of non-existence

The animal pretends to be alive but has a dream in its forehead. The stone pretends to be hard and there is order in the world.

The skepticism manifested in Weöres's late poems seems to testify to the dominance of the sense of insecurity, alienation, and existential anxieties of the 20th century over the creative presence open to sacredness, radically opposed to the oppressive small-mindedness of his age. Yet, in some of his last poems, the poet is still able to rise and break away from the world of hopelessness and pain *(Odatúl, odaát* [Beyond, Over There]; *Változatok egy Narekaci-témára* [Variations on a Narekaci-theme]; *Angelus Silesius*). The inexhaustible patience and receptivity of organic and inorganic beings, of the primordial elements, the duality between matter and spirit, body and soul that are at odds with each other, yet inseparable, provide, in this context, an opportunity for confidence to the individual who is forced to face finality, the ephemeral nature of life, but at the same time consciously reflects on the earthly and celestial reality. As the verdict-like words of the 1987 *Lépések* [Footsteps] aptly state: "Footsteps sound right at the bottom / but there is always a way up / upward."

One thing is certain: Sándor Weöres's poems, despite all hopelessness and doubt in the late works, proclaim the presence of the divine principle and the miracle of Creation in a world without Sacrality, a world turned away from God.

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