

# REPRESENTATIONS OF THE SACRED IN ARGHEZI'S PSALMS

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## *Abstract*

The paper „Representations of the sacred in Arghezi's psalms” approaches sacred's attributes in terms of Arghezi's philosophical thought. Arghezi's psalms develop a dialectic of freedom and limit in relationship with the divine Principle. The stream of the psalms is the result of the meeting between the human being and being, as general concept. The Absolute's metamorphosis between the edges of the intellect and the edges of sensorial contribute to the poet's desire to transcend the immanence, as a temptation of the prohibited. Arghezi's Psalms become a poetry of revolt and questions, justified by the presence of type of Davidian prayer, as a modern replicate inside psalmist's conscious.

**Keywords and phrases:** „the hidden presence”, „exceeded-reached”, the religious imaginary, sacred, the Psalm.

## **Introduction**

Portrayed both as the poet a „of faith and denial” (Cioculescu, 1971) and even since his debut volume, *Appropriate Words (Cuvinte potrivite, 1927)*, Tudor Arghezi faced the nostalgia of transcendent endowments, which in religious terms denotes an act of impiety. Within the lyric of the psalms and beyond, there is a *descent* (Tudor Vianu, 1979) of the divinity to the earthly level, revealing a human guilt, an arrogance that offends *the upper deity* (Crohmălniceanu, 1974). Shaped as a bitter resignation, *Since You Know Me (De când mă știi)* triggers in the Arghezi's characters an infinite condition of the soul as a result of questions and doubts, and sometimes as a result of the gestures of apostasy, living the an intense dramatic tension alternative between *faith or faithlessness*. Under the seal of a *deus absconditus* (Crohmălniceanu, 1974), the poet lives a *quest drama* with great inner strength, wanting to reach the definitive certainty about the clear God's existence or nonexistence. In the *Psalms Cycle*, the divine's *attributes* emphasize the poet's drama engaged in controversy between man and God, a drama that on the one hand seems to have no solution, and on the other hand, seems to emphasize the desire searching and identifying oneself in a constantly *exceeded-reached*<sup>1358</sup> attitude – „I want to touch you and scream," «It is!»” (*Psalm - I think to weight you in the sound and silence*) as a nuanced result of the encounter between *the human being and the state of being*.

## **The Source of the Psalm Poetry**

The profound analysis of the *Psalms Cycle* by Arghezi carried out by Nicolae Balotă in the study *Tudor Arghezi's Work (Opera lui Tudor Arghezi, 1979)* highlights that the psalms are synchronous to the decisive moment that shapes the poet's lyric physiognomy. The exegete thought that Arghezi's *Psalms* are the monologues of the prophet, of *the one - that*

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<sup>1358</sup> Gabriel Liiceanu, *Despre limită (About limits)*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 1994, p. 40.

expresses itself - in the wilderness, a *Vox clamatis in deserto*<sup>1359</sup>, a voice that is lost in the wilderness of the world, in the absence of a perceptible God by the human senses. The poet's testimony reported by Barătu T. Arghezi (playwright, essayist, and writer), the poet's son, in the study *The Clericalism, Psalms, Testament* (2001), answers the questions pro or against the Arghezi's *phenomenon*: „I would state that these verses are part of a moment of deep loneliness and questions, more interior ones, of doubt, of quest and uncertainty; (...) The psalms are the evidence of a quest, my own and maybe of each and every one of us.”<sup>1360</sup> The *Psalm* meant for the poet an invocation towards the abstract divine and he tried, in his own language, to give a provisional definition: „a search of the infinity that still dwells within us, without being able to totally define it. *This is when the poetry comes into play!*”<sup>1361</sup>. Arghezi did not consider a *Psalm* to be a song, as mentioned by Barătu T. Arghezi in the same study (2001), and furthermore it is a confession of misunderstanding of the unknown that dominates the whole life, as well as a dialogue with God: „In the Psalms, which are the questions of the soul, the doubts of the thought and the need to express my intimate trouble, like a confession (...). This intimate dialogue was constant for my entire life, being initiated in a not so happy youth and it remained steady to the present day.”<sup>1362</sup> The *Psalms Cycle* is based on the biblical readings of the *Old and New Testament*. The attitude of profound admiration that he had for the Scripture, primarily „for the beauty of the language in which it was written, and also for the beauty of the narrated events, (...) that were (...), not only subjects of deep reflection, but also direct topics for spiritual personal inspirations”, will constitute the foundation for his the faith philosophy and especially the linguistic technique of presenting the Christian teachings, related to the events that have marked his life. The discovery of the link with the *Testamentary* text, sometimes with the *Psalms of David*, other times with another chapter from the *Old Testament*, meaning the *Book of Job*, often provides the key of reading the arghezian poems. In this sense, the exegete affirmed in the study *Tudor Arghezi's Work* (1979) that „anyone who wants to understand Arghezi's imaginary must read his poems along with the Bible.”<sup>1363</sup> As unknowable is God for man, in Arghezi's perceiving, He is the inevitable reference term, the *sine qua non* condition for self fulfillment, summing the Christian attributes, in the Cartesian meaning of *dubito ergo cogito*<sup>1364</sup>. In his poetry, Arghezi remains a *homo religious*, Cornel Morarau states: „The poet is always ready to meet with ingenuity the sacred mystery, seemingly effortless and without premeditation, with the primordial candor of which the modern man has irreversibly estranged.”<sup>1365</sup> (*The Sacred Feeling in Arghezi's Poetry, Sentimentul sacrului în lirica argheziană*, 2007). The conclusions revealed by Mircea Zăciu in the study entitled *Restitution, Tudor Arghezi*

<sup>1359</sup> Nicolae Balotă, *Opera lui Tudor Arghezi (The Work of Tudor Arghezi)*, Eminescu Publishing House, Bucharest, 1979, p.149.

<sup>1360</sup> Barătu T. Arghezi, *Duhovnicească, Psalmi, Testament (Spiritual Psalms Testament)*, Dacia Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 2001, p.86.

<sup>1361</sup> *Idem*, pp. 66-67.

<sup>1362</sup> *Idem*, pp. 61-62.

<sup>1363</sup> Nicolae Balotă, *op. cit.*, pp. 149-214.

<sup>1364</sup> Alexandru Andriescu, *Psalmii în literatura română (The Psalms in the Romanian Literature)*, „Al. I. Cuza” University Press, Iași, 2004, pp. 88-89.

<sup>1365</sup> Cornel Moraru, „Sentimentul sacrului în lirica argheziană” („The Feeling of Sacred in Arghezi's Poetry”) in *Sacrul în poezia românească. Studii și articole (The Sacred in the Romanian Poetry. Studies and Articles)*, (coord. by Aurel Pantea) The Science Book Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 2007, p 157.

(Restituiri, Tudor Arghezi, 1974), regarding the poet's monastic experience that did not enabled him to identify the answers to the religious questions, but allowed him to learn how "to jump from beneath"<sup>1366</sup> and to find the strange taste of the poetic language, proved to be the very evidence that in Arghezi the poetic spirit was primary to the religious spirit. Somehow similarly, Nicolae Manolescu determined that in the Psalms poetry „we are facing, therefore, the presence of a «reversed paradox pantheism»"<sup>1367</sup> and important for the Psalms literature is that Arghezi's monastic experience „(...) belonged first and foremost to a poet's spirit, and secondly to a religious one"<sup>1368</sup>. The above mentioned exegete expressed in a study entitled *Tudor Arghezi, Irreligious Poet* (1974) that in the arghezian lyrics „there is only one Creator, one divinity, in Arghezi's life and poetry: the Poet himself”.<sup>1369</sup> The Psalms poems reveal an Arghezi who „is groping in the dark” as E. Lovinescu affirmed (*The History of the Romanian Contemporary Literature, Istoria literaturii române contemporane, 1926-1929*), trying to persuade himself of the divine presence through the very evidence felt in his own palms (*Psalm - I think to weight you in the sound and silence*), we can state such as a reinvented Thomas the Apostle. The rebellion against the hidden state of being divulges the „psalmist” drama denoted by the ineffective feeling of not being able to symbolize the *sacred* as Ov. S. Crohmălniceanu thought (*Tudor Arghezi, 1974*): „Arghezi's religious poetry transliterates the quest for God. (...) The poet does not comprehend the state of revelation and remains open to doubt.”<sup>1370</sup>

### **Representations of the Sacred in a Arghezi's Psalms**

The representation of the sacred in Arghezi's *Psalms* originates in “the archetypal human situations facing the divine”<sup>1371</sup>, as Nicolae Balotă stated (*The Works of Tudor Arghezi, 1979*). In the *Psalms*, Arghezi proposes an extra-religious hypothesis, dialectic and comprehensive when subjected to summary examination: „a process perceived within the poetic ground, that of metamorphosis, of osmosis between spiritual and material, both terms interpreted as remote moments of the same substance”<sup>1372</sup>, according to G . Călinescu (*History of the Romanian Literature from Origins to Present, Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent, 1941*).

The opening Psalm of the *Appropriate words* volume (1927), *I could live for ever with the fellowship*, reveals an *Eternal God*, in whose presence the attitude of the poet-creator is that of a doomed man. In the psalm creation, there is present „a dialectic of prayer and pitilessness, of humbleness and vanity, a sacred/demonic antinomy that emphasizes the poet's Titan-like nature, overwhelmed by the world's materialism, as well as by the ascending desire

<sup>1366</sup> Mircea Zăciu, *Restituiri, Tudor Arghezi, Ars Poetica (Restitution, Tudor Arghezi, Ars Poetica)*, Edition, preface and notes by Ilie Guțan, Dacia Publishing House, Cluj, 1974.

<sup>1367</sup> Nicolae Manolescu, *Tudor Arghezi, poet nereligios (Tudor Arghezi, Irreligious Poet)*, The Romanian Book Publishing House, Bucharest, 1971, p. 163.

<sup>1368</sup> Nicolae Manolescu, *Poezi moderne (Modern Poets)*, Aula Publishing House, Brașov, 2003, p. 82.

<sup>1369</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>1370</sup> Ov. S. Crohmălniceanu, *Tudor Arghezi (Tudor Arghezi)*, The State Literature and Art Publishing House, Bucharest, 1974, p. 143.

<sup>1371</sup> Nicolae Balotă, *op. cit.*, p.15.

<sup>1372</sup> George Călinescu, *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent (The History of the Romanian Literature from Origins to Present)*, Revised and enlarged second edition, edition and preface by Al. Piru, Minerva Publishing House, 1985, p. 725.

to spirituality, to divinity.”<sup>1373</sup> (Iulian Boldea, *The Sacred and Profane in Tudor Arghezi's Poetry, Sacru și profan în poezia lui Tudor Arghezi*, 2005). „The eternity” which the poets refers to in the beginning of the psalm is not the path to which the mystic aspires to, nor even the believer, but is the *eternity* of a new creation, emanating from a natural Dasein perfect work (M. Heidegger, *The Origin of the Artwork, Originea operei de artă*, 1979). Only through the evocative power of thought as the only path towards transcendence which does not know the space and time boundaries, *that given feeling* may be materialized, that „restless celestial passion” mentioned by Nicolae Balotă (*Explanations of the Psalms, Scholii la Psalmi*, 1979). The literary scholar believes that *restless celestial passion* is reflected in a negative absolute: darkness, void, Hades and it is the assumed damnation paradox, the Dostoyevsky's „underground man”, the modern poet damnation from William Blake's poems (*Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Căsătoria cerului cu iadul*, 1790) during epigonic moments, as artist's condition under rebellion. The supernatural solution – „That I possess the absolute heal of everybody's death” becomes the existential certitude of the poet-creator. His thaumaturgic art of the word (Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode, Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik, Truth and Method, the Main Characteristics of a Philosophical Hermeneutics, Adevăr și metodă, Principalele caracteristici ale unui hermeneutici filosofice*, 1960), his art of writing („Our Star, sharp in Heaven”) are an *ex nihilo* (Balotă, 1979) for the singer-poet, accepted as a *symbol/divine sign - a seal* of limitless creative potential through which the arghezian craftsman, always doubting, aspires to a new eternity. In the *arghezian lyrical imagery* (Balotă, 1979), *darkness and rotteness* („I want to perish in the darkness and in rotteness”) are two important elements, images of the spiritual darkness world, the frustration limit against divinity, a embodiment of God's death through *the very self*, evoking Baudelaire who identified a „double craving” in itself towards God or Satan, or evoking Blake's or Poe's continuous oscillations between *light blue and dark black*, fulfilling the role of an imperative artistic act. The end of the Psalm constitutes a „mirrored” reflection (Pompiliu Caraioan, *Genesis of the Sacred, Geneza sacrului*, 1967) of the alleged perspective from the first line of the psalm, „I could”, i.e. a limited perspective as a form of revolt, of rebellion<sup>1374</sup>. The poet's conclusion, *sharing/ in fellowship*, is given by the state of self-suppress, which thwarts the creativity gift, a human *hybris*, subject to the supreme sacrifice, the only envisioned solution, in other words, the *self-renunciation*, recalling the *Testament* text from Mark.

From imaging an *Everlasting Almighty God*, “the absolute heal of everybody's death” (*I could live for ever with the fellowship*), which constitutes the very base of the mystic's beliefs towards eternity, the poet will end in representing for himself a *present absence's* God (*So alone, I am, O Lord, and sideways!*) as Nicolae Balotă identified in his study, *Explanations of the Psalms Scholii the Psalms* (1979). In this *Psalm*, the poet will embody the metaphysical position of rebellion through which man claims access to the sight” of the Hidden Absolute, as granted, and also to the “all sight of God” (Hegel, *Phänomenologie des*

<sup>1373</sup> Iulian Boldea, *Istoria didactică a poeziei românești (Teaching the History of Romanian Poetry)*, „Studies Collection”, Aula Publishing House, Brașov, 2005, p. 331 and in „*The Sacred and Profane Poetry of Tudor Arghezi*”, <http://pdfsb.com/readonline>.

<sup>1374</sup> Dumitru Micu, *Tudor Arghezi (Tudor Arghezi)*, The Romanian Cultural Institute Publishing House, Bucharest, 2004, p. 185.

*Geistes, Phenomenology of the Spirit, Fenomenologia spiritului*, 1807), a *monad* (Leibniz, *Monadologia*, 1720), and human soul absolution will be reached through the power of words, eventually. A reinvented Job unlike the Bible Job acknowledging his self-worthlessness when facing the Almighty Creator God is identified and the poet denies the divinity, the supreme authority and the sacrifice appears as futile to him: „Why Father, would I give and to whom?” This arghezian *lamento* reminds of the *Biblical lamento* from „The Weeping of Jeremiah” or „The Book of Job”, in a repeated blame to a speechless God, God *absconditus*. Any *hybris* (Balotă, 1979) of his condition sublimates itself in pain and thus a new pressing state appears that is rendered in the pathetic interrogation: „And I serve you; but for how long, Lord?”. In a wakeful state, *the Divinity servant-poet* (Balotă, *Explanations of the Psalms Scholii the Psalms*, 1979) expects with „outstretched” arms, crucified on the altar, as a sign of rebellion and not with „raised” arms in adoration and thanksgiving. The interrogative exclamation of the unjustified psalmist reminds of David’s exclamation: „Turn around, Lord! Till when?” (*Psalm* 90.13) and Nicolae Balotă considered that it does not hold in itself: “either the romantic solitude of the dark hero, of the incomprehensible genius, of the self-esteem hurt man or of a hero having a too vulnerable sensibility, or the existentialist isolation, a human *Ausgeworfenheit* in an alien void confronted world, but with the God forgotten segregation loneliness of man, streaming from the mythical sufferance of the banned from the primeval Eden, allowed in his own will”<sup>1375</sup>. The *oblivion*, that deliberately *given*, that Arghezi reproaches to divinity, can often be met in the Biblical Psalms. A connecting attitude of the *faith and denial* as defined by Alexandru Andriescu in the study entitled *The Psalms in the Romanian literature (Psalmii în literatura română*, 2003), as an “update of presence”, a God named „the Word Absence”<sup>1376</sup>. The literary critic pointed that the non-presence of the divine triggers the poet’s lament as a rebelled answer to God’s “oblivion” to manifesting Itself in a divine Silence: „*Deus absconditus*”. Although Arghezi’s Psalm verses are defiant and create the opposite image of the Biblical Psalms, which express the state of penitence, humility, a gratefulness and worship attitude towards the *Eternal God*, the poet craves to an experience *in and through the power of the poetic word*. Șerban Cioculescu (1971) underlined the dialectic power of the *homo duplex* (*Introduction to Arghezi’s Poetry, Introducere în poezia lui Arghezi*, 1971): „ that combination of the morbid and gentle, of the verbal violence and idealism, which is the very aspect of the later *homo duplex* belongs to the Arghezi’s primeval physiognomy.”<sup>1377</sup> Al. Cistelean pointed „the fame of *homo duplex*, (not as moral duplicity, but rather in an ontological meaning) is fully justified. Arghezi experiences his vocations wholly, even if they exclude each other - or at least seem to”.<sup>1378</sup> (*My neighbor – God*, article, 2007).

Tudor Arghezi does not find solace in faith; still he wants to bring divinity closer through the power of the verb, through the rhetorical discourse, switching from a *Deus absconditus* to a *Deus - Logos*: „*My prayer is wordless*”. The poet appears as one of the *religious mythic-archaic people*, fighting against their Lord (Job), confronting Him (Jonah),

<sup>1375</sup> Nicolae Balotă, *op. cit.*, p.162.

<sup>1376</sup> Alexandru Andriescu, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

<sup>1377</sup> Șerban Cioculescu, *Introducere în poezia lui T. Arghezi, (Introduction to Arghezi’s Poetry)*, second edition reviewed and added, Minerva Publishing House, Bucharest, 1971, p.100.

<sup>1378</sup> Al. Cistelean, *Vecinul meu – Dumnezeu (My neighbor – God)*, in „Vatra” Magazine, nr. 3, 2007, p. 43.

assaulting the heavens, fighting the angel (James). Under an inner pressure of (elated) approach towards divinity, the modern poet shifts between extremes, like Baudelaire. Al. Andriescu (2003) considered that Arghezi's poetry is a *mysterium fascinans* and Arghezi's lyrics are not a „confrontation”<sup>1379</sup> between the poet and *God the Word* or the *Logos-Word*, as the poet expresses his deeply sincere faithfulness towards the divinity. The poet's inversion whose demiurgic-titanic enthusiasm owned the „Word” / (now chooses) the „silence” instead, this rather being a Davidian thought (the Biblical *Psalms* 138:5). The psalm reminds of the secretly, mysteriously uttered Prayer of the Heart (the Book of Samuel the Prophet). The doubt of the poet's certainty is meant to uncover that secret born from the ardent passion of spirit towards other spirit, a trial repeated over and over by Arghezi when attempting to defy the limits of thought, an essential condition of ek-stazia, man „self-escapement”. Both the creator and the created prove to be a futile hope when confronting the *Night of the Sacred*, remaining within the holderlinian meaning the ones who remain inception (*Was bleibet aber stiften die Dichter*). Șerban Cioculescu in *Introduction to Arghezi's Poetry* (1971) identified a bitter inner struggle between the fierce wish to believe and the burning disbelief, when following the material certitude or revelation path<sup>1380</sup>. Nicolae Balotă underlines that the perseverance to communicate beyond word puts in lines the initiation availabilities through which a relationship to a *present absence*, hidden from view, or a God's *self-seeing*, can be set (Hegel). The very belief in the power of love will allow the poet to overthrow divinity by the power of human reason which it angelically transfigured: in the *Psalms of the Sacrament*, the *Woman-Word* implies a feminine side of the soul, due to the alchemical principle founded on the symbolic path of the poetical destiny. On the other hand, the poet reveals an ontological desire for solitude.<sup>1381</sup>

The psalm attests the poet's philosophical concern regarding soul's connection to God (G. Călinescu, *The History of the Romanian Literature from Its Origins to the Present, Istoria literaturii române de la origini pînă în prezent*, 1941). The metamorphosis of the *sacred* into two sides of woman: the „letter-woman” and the „ax-woman” (opposite metaphors as a way of transfiguration) have the same impact on the various states of poetic imagery (Ilie Guțan): „the poet-the dream” (imaginative and projective availability), „the poet-the trunk” (as a sign of fierceness and vulnerability), „the poet-the forest” (complex murmur capacity), „the poet-the victim”. The two existential states, *faith and doubt*, as they are united in God – „the *Word-the woman*” mainly focus on the aesthetic theme of Arghezi. The divine as the *feminine side of the soul* is a cluster of states<sup>1382</sup> which bring together the moments of *spiritual creation* as a manifestation of the mystery, a form of the *sacred achieved* only in the state of „The woman prevalent in me”. The divine pictured as – *the woman-the idea* draws a face that is “purged through a platonic clarification of all that is too tellurian” (Balotă, 1979). The image of the feminine sacred is mirrored in the profane attitude of the woman as the spiritual time mistress, a symbol of the Incarnation of perennality. The idea of the „sacred” is reflected in the following statement „you lay your forehead on my soul” (an effect of the apocalyptic text

<sup>1379</sup> Nicolae Balotă, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

<sup>1380</sup> Șerban Cioculescu, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

<sup>1381</sup> Jean-Pierre Richard, *Poezie și profunzime (Poetry and Depth)*, in original *Poésie et profondeur*, Seuil, 1955; Preface by Mircea Martin, Translated by Cecilia Stefanescu, Universe Publishing, 1974, p. 141.

<sup>1382</sup> Doina Butiurca, *Introducere la o estetică a sacralului (Introduction to the Aesthetics of the Sacred)*, Ars Academic Publishing, Bucharest, 2008, p.86.

understanding) as a sign of *total* submission, marked on the forehead and the hand, the seal for the chosen one to serve, as it is shown in the Book of Revelation. The presence of the *Word-letter*, the perfume of *Word-woman* is painfully felt by the poet and for a long time too, like his spiritual status of uncertainties born from a *sacred ruthless*. *The mystery-revelation* of the *word-woman* incorporates both arghezian dialectic: certainty-deception, faith-doubt, sacred-profane at the same time.

## Conclusions

Throughout all the 19<sup>th</sup> Psalms, one may distinguish the poet's dialogue with God, with the *Unknown* which does not show any of Its purposes, yet, although these are expected by Arghezi during his entire life. The philosophical questions regarding the human reason and condition in the universe can be traced all the way through the Psalm cycle. The poet feels anguished and confused: from the restlessness attitude, the praise gradually changes into irony, into rebellion, into blame for faith vanity, and ending by changing the hosannas for curses, both being part of the arghezian sacred, revealed by the two moral ways: *dedication and blasphemy* (Aurel Codoban, *Sacred and ontophany, Sacru și ontofanie*, 1998). The language is perceived, by the literary critics, as pathetic or accusatory, hopeful or hopeless, an artistic arrogance, and it is built in the manner to achieve the understanding of the universal mystery which fascinates the poet, thus certifying the poet's existence by external evidences. The „*Psalms*” from *Appropriate Words* volume render, by their rhetoric, a stout yearning towards perfection, a cleavage refusal, a craving for self-achievement from an absolute point of view. Tudor Arghezi continues to be the Romanian poet equally praised and questioned, an unique example of arguments regarding the *sacred and profane, the faith and denial*, at the same time.

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