



RHETORIC OF EMPTY TRANSCENDENCE IN ROMANIAN MODERNISM: TUDOR ARGHEZI AND THE PARADOXES OF FAITH

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Abstract: *This paper examines the rhetoric of empty transcendence in Romanian modernism, focusing on Tudor Arghezi and the paradoxical relationship between faith, doubt, divine absence, and the desire for transcendence in his poetry. Particular attention is given to the Psalms and to the religious imagery through which Arghezi constructs a lyrical dialogue with a God who is repeatedly invoked but remains silent, hidden, or inaccessible. Rather than interpreting this silence as a simple rejection of religion, the study approaches it as a productive poetic tension in which the absent God becomes a central presence precisely through the speaker's continuous attempt to address, challenge, and understand Him.*

The article discusses several paradoxes generated by this rhetoric. The lyrical subject seeks certainty but encounters uncertainty; he desires transcendence while remaining deeply attached to the material world; he questions divine justice while continuing to address the divine; and he transforms religious vocabulary into a language capable of expressing both belief and crisis. Arghezi's modernism therefore does not merely abandon the sacred. It transforms inherited religious forms into a modern language of spiritual conflict, where prayer, irony, revolt, desire, and doubt coexist.

The study argues that Arghezi's religious modernism is defined by an unresolved tension rather than by a final theological solution. The rhetoric of absence preserves the question of God while refusing a simple reconciliation between human suffering and divine order. In this sense, empty transcendence does not signify the disappearance of the sacred, but a modern condition in which transcendence can no longer be experienced as an unquestionable certainty. The crisis of faith is consequently converted into poetic form, and the impossibility of a definitive answer becomes one of the principal sources of lyrical

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INTRODUCTION

Tudor Arghezi occupies a distinctive position in Romanian literature because his poetry repeatedly places the material world, the sacred, and the crisis of belief in direct and often contradictory relation. His religious poems cannot be reduced to either orthodox affirmation or straightforward denial. Instead, they stage a persistent confrontation between the human subject and a transcendent interlocutor whose presence is desired precisely when it appears uncertain.

The problem of transcendence is central to modernist experience. Modernity weakens inherited certainties and places the individual before a world in which traditional forms of meaning can no longer be accepted without interrogation. In Arghezi's poetry, this situation takes a particularly intense form: the speaker continues to use the vocabulary of faith even when certainty has become impossible.

The religious language therefore survives as both an inheritance and a problem. The poem becomes the space in which belief is tested rather than simply declared. The lyrical subject does not receive a stable theological answer; instead, he exposes the emotional and intellectual pressure produced by the absence of such an answer.

The expression “empty transcendence” used in this study does not mean that the sacred has disappeared from Arghezi's work. On the contrary, transcendence remains remarkably active at the level of language and desire. What is “empty” is the immediate certainty of divine presence. God is addressed, sought, challenged, and sometimes accused, but He does not provide the stable response that would close the dialogue.

TUDOR ARGHEZI AND THE MODERNIST RECONFIGURATION OF RELIGIOUS POETRY

Arghezi's religious vocabulary draws on recognizable Christian forms: prayer, God, sin, salvation, suffering, judgment, creation, and the relationship between the human being and the divine. Yet these elements are reorganized within a modern lyrical consciousness. The speaker does not simply repeat a received doctrine. He confronts it, tests it, and exposes the difficulties that emerge when traditional explanations meet human experience.

The modernist character of this poetry is visible in the instability of the speaking position. The lyrical voice may sound devout in one moment and rebellious in another. Such shifts should not automatically be interpreted as inconsistency. They reveal the structure of a consciousness that cannot abandon the sacred but can no longer inhabit it with uncomplicated certainty.

The religious imaginary thus becomes a field of conflict. Faith is not presented as a finished state but as a process involving memory, desire, fear, anger, and intellectual resistance. The modern subject wants an answer from transcendence, yet the very act of demanding an answer exposes the distance between the human and the divine.

Arghezi's modernism also transforms the relationship between elevated religious language and the concrete world. Biblical vocabulary can coexist with everyday objects, physical sensations, and images of matter. This mixture prevents the sacred from becoming abstract and places the crisis of faith inside lived experience.



THE PSALMS: PRAYER AS CONFRONTATION

The Psalms are among the clearest examples of Arghezi's transformation of inherited religious discourse. The title establishes a relation with biblical prayer, but the poetic voice modifies the traditional model by introducing an intense sense of confrontation. The speaker addresses God directly, yet the address frequently contains reproach, doubt, and impatience.

This rhetorical strategy produces a significant paradox. If the speaker were completely convinced that God was absent, there would be no reason to continue addressing Him. Conversely, if divine presence were experienced as immediate and unquestionable, the repeated questioning would lose much of its force. The persistence of the address therefore indicates that doubt and belief remain intertwined.

The Arghezian Psalm can consequently be read as a poetics of frustrated dialogue. The speaker insists on communication while repeatedly encountering its interruption. The poem does not solve the theological problem; it dramatizes the impossibility of solving it.

Prayer becomes a form of poetic investigation. The lyrical subject asks, demands, accuses, remembers, and waits. Each of these actions presupposes a relationship with transcendence, even when the relationship is marked by silence.

The form of prayer is therefore preserved while its emotional function changes. Instead of confirming an already established faith, prayer becomes the language through which uncertainty itself is articulated. The sacred survives as a question that refuses to disappear.

THE PARADOX OF BELIEF AND DOUBT

One of the central paradoxes of Arghezi's religious poetry is that doubt itself can become evidence of continued attachment to the sacred. The speaker's rebellion presupposes an addressee. His accusations require the existence of a figure capable of being accused, even when that figure remains silent.

This paradox is reinforced by the coexistence of humility and defiance. The speaker can recognize human limitation while simultaneously demanding that divine justice become intelligible. Such a position creates a tension between submission and resistance. The lyrical subject is neither securely inside faith nor comfortably outside it.

Arghezi's achievement lies partly in giving this instability a durable poetic form. Instead of presenting faith as a coherent system, he represents it as a lived experience marked by contradiction. The language of prayer is preserved, but its function changes: it becomes a language through which uncertainty can be articulated.

The paradox also affects the representation of knowledge. The speaker desires certainty but repeatedly discovers the limits of human understanding. Transcendence remains desirable precisely because it cannot be reduced to ordinary knowledge, yet its inaccessibility produces frustration.

Faith and doubt therefore operate as mutually dependent forces. Doubt keeps the question open, while faith supplies the horizon toward which the question is directed. The poem exists in the space between these two movements.



THE SILENCE OF GOD AND THE RHETORIC OF ABSENCE

Silence is one of the most important rhetorical conditions of Arghezi's religious imagination. A silent God is not merely a theological concept; He is a structural absence around which the poem is organized. The speaker's words acquire urgency because they seem to move toward an interlocutor who refuses or fails to answer.

This absence changes the meaning of poetic speech. The poem becomes both prayer and substitute for prayer, both communication and record of failed communication. The lyrical voice continues to speak even when the possibility of response is uncertain.

The rhetoric of absence is especially significant in a modernist context because it converts uncertainty into an aesthetic principle. Instead of concealing the crisis of meaning, the poem exposes it. The silence surrounding the divine becomes part of the structure of the work.

Silence also produces a paradox of presence. The more the divine is represented as inaccessible, the more intensely the poem is organized around the divine addressee. Absence becomes a form of presence at the level of poetic structure.

This mechanism helps explain why Arghezi's religious poetry can be both intimate and confrontational. The speaker is emotionally close to the divine because he is unable to stop addressing it, yet the absence of an answer creates distance and frustration.

MATTER, BODY, AND THE DESIRE FOR TRANSCENDENCE

Arghezi's poetry does not construct transcendence in isolation from material existence. His poetic universe is intensely physical, attentive to body, earth, objects, labor, decay, and sensory experience. This material orientation complicates the religious dimension of his work because the desire for transcendence must continually pass through the concrete world.

The resulting tension is not simply between sacred and profane. Rather, the material world becomes one of the principal means through which the sacred is imagined, questioned, or desired. Transcendence is sought from within the conditions of embodied existence.

The speaker's desire for God therefore does not erase the world. It makes the distance between material existence and transcendence more visible. The sacred is sought from within the body and within history, not from an abstract position outside them.

This relation contributes to the paradoxical character of Arghezi's faith. The poet wants to move beyond the visible world, yet his language repeatedly returns to concrete images. The tension between matter and transcendence becomes a defining feature of his poetic imagination.

BIBLICAL LANGUAGE AND THE MATERIALITY OF THE WORD

Arghezi's use of biblical vocabulary is inseparable from his understanding of poetic language as material. Words are not transparent containers for abstract ideas; they have sound, weight, texture, and emotional force. This materiality becomes particularly important when the poem attempts to approach an immaterial object such as God.



The poet cannot speak outside language, yet language cannot guarantee access to transcendence. Every name for God remains human and therefore incomplete. The poem consequently oscillates between the desire to name the sacred and the recognition that naming cannot eliminate mystery.

Biblical language is therefore transformed rather than simply reproduced. Familiar religious terms enter a modern poetic environment marked by doubt and psychological conflict. The sacred lexicon becomes a site of experimentation in which inherited meanings are tested, fractured, and recombined.

The tension between word and transcendence also explains why Arghezi's religious poetry can appear simultaneously reverent and irreverent. Provocation does not necessarily abolish the sacred; it can function as a method of testing the strength of the religious relationship.

BLASPHEMY, IRONY, AND THE PERSISTENCE OF THE SACRED

The presence of provocative or apparently blasphemous language in Arghezi should be understood in relation to the persistence of the religious framework it challenges. Blasphemy is rhetorically meaningful only where a sacred order remains recognizable. The challenge itself therefore reveals the importance of what is being challenged.

Irony performs a similar function. By placing religious expectations beside experiences of suffering, silence, or disappointment, Arghezi creates a distance between inherited formulations and lived reality. The result is neither simple parody nor straightforward affirmation.

Irony keeps incompatible meanings in circulation and prevents the poem from settling into a single doctrinal position. The speaker may question the divine while continuing to preserve the language of divine address.

The sacred consequently survives through conflict. The more the speaker challenges God, the more clearly God remains the central horizon of his speech. Resistance becomes another form of relation.

PARADOX AS A STRUCTURE OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

Paradox is not an ornamental feature in Arghezi's religious poetry; it is a structural principle. The speaker believes and doubts, invokes and rejects, seeks presence and encounters absence. These oppositions do not resolve into a final synthesis because their tension is precisely what sustains the poem.

The notion of empty transcendence emerges from this unresolved structure. If transcendence were completely present, the rhetoric of seeking would lose much of its force. If transcendence were completely absent, the persistent language of prayer would become difficult to explain.

Arghezi's paradoxes therefore represent a modern form of spiritual consciousness. The speaker experiences the sacred as both necessary and inaccessible. He needs transcendence as a horizon of meaning but cannot transform it into a stable possession.

The poem remains suspended between these poles. Its value lies not in resolving the contradiction but in giving it a precise linguistic and emotional form.



ARGHEZI AND THE MODERNIST RECONFIGURATION OF FAITH

Arghezi's treatment of faith can be situated within the broader transformations associated with Romanian modernism. Modernist literature frequently questions inherited hierarchies, stable identities, and unified systems of meaning. In Arghezi, this questioning reaches the religious domain.

The modernist reconfiguration of faith does not require the disappearance of religious language. Instead, religious language becomes self-conscious, unstable, and dialogical. The speaker knows that the old vocabulary is inherited, yet he also knows that his experience cannot be fully contained by inherited formulas.

The poem becomes a site of negotiation between tradition and modern subjectivity. Biblical forms remain recognizable, but their emotional and rhetorical functions are transformed. Prayer becomes an instrument for investigating the crisis of belief.

From this perspective, Arghezi's religious poetry is neither simply traditional nor simply anti-religious. It is modern precisely because it keeps the question open. The absence of a final answer is what allows the conflict between belief and doubt to remain productive.

CONCLUSIONS

The rhetoric of empty transcendence in Tudor Arghezi's poetry emerges from a fundamental paradox: the speaker experiences divine absence while continuing to address the divine. This paradox transforms religious language into a language of modern spiritual crisis. The Psalms, in particular, show how prayer can become confrontation, how doubt can coexist with desire, and how silence can intensify rather than eliminate the need for transcendence.

Arghezi's religious modernism is therefore defined by unresolved tension. His poetry refuses to reduce faith to certainty or doubt to simple negation. Instead, it represents the two as interdependent states within the same lyrical consciousness. The speaker questions God because God remains important; he protests against silence because he still desires an answer.

The concept of empty transcendence should consequently be understood not as the disappearance of the sacred but as the loss of immediate theological certainty. Transcendence remains present as absence, expectation, memory, and desire.

By transforming this crisis into poetic form, Arghezi creates a religious modernism in which the unanswered question becomes a central source of literary meaning. The poem does not close the relationship between human consciousness and transcendence; it preserves that relationship as a difficult and productive uncertainty.



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