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Transcendental Poetry in the Baroque Period: Angelus Silesius's Religious and Philosophical Epigrams as Reflections About the Self and the Divine

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ABSTRACT

One of the greatest poets of epigrams, Angelus Silesius, was not only highly famous for his short stanzas written in the latter half of the seventeenth century. He also exerted, both during his lifetime and then during his posterity, and thus until today, a deep influence on poetry, philosophy, and theology. But his epigrams are extremely difficult to understand and represent, despite their formal simplicity, a major intellectual challenge. This is both a hurdle and simultaneously an opportunity because human epistemology grows when there are barriers, especially linguistic, conceptual, and intellectual ones, under the right circumstances. This paper will reintroduce Silesius as a Baroque poet who deserves our full attention today because he provided us in a most unique fashion with literary images to capture some of the most subtle, spiritual, and sensory experiences in human life formulated during the Baroque period. Relying on dialectics, rhetorical strategies, and metaphorical language, Silesius proves to be one of the most meaningful poets from the past who speaks to us today and probably also tomorrow, offering perspectives toward the personal experience of the transcendental.

Keywords: Angelus Silesius (Johann Scheffler); Epigrams; Transcendence; German Baroque Poetry; Poetic Epistemology; Prophetic Reflections; Religious Literature

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1. Introduction

Poetry is simply a literary medium for the individual to embark on a quest for transcendence, relying on words, sounds, images, phrases, terms, and other linguistic features, building bridges to a spiritual dimension. Of course, we as human beings live in and through our material world; we eat, put on clothes, move around, and pursue our professional lives. But then strange, mostly irrational things happen that find no good, that is, rational explanation in our physical reality. People fall in love with each other, or they form friendships and feel strong bonds with the other person. We constantly learn that family members and neighbors have died, and we thus realize that we are simply mortal as well. Or, we listen to music and are awed because the auditory aesthetics sweeps us from our feet. Artworks can have the same effect, or we discover a unique natural setting and are simply stunned, speechless, and almost delirious with delight because of the beauty confronting and speaking to us, especially because we tend to sense a deeper truth behind the natural phenomena.

In other words, there are constantly moments in our lives that expose us to the ineffable, or transcendental. Many people then refer to their God, their religion, their faith, whatever that might mean, or they talk about miracles and wonders. Religiosity has always served the extremely important function of giving form and shape to an intrinsic desire or need to come to terms with the divine, which seems to stand behind all physical existence, whether we believe in a specific religion or not.

As odd as it might be, the German Baroque poet Angelus Silesius continues to be of greatest importance for us today, both in terms of his literary creativity and in terms of his philosophical and theological reflections [1]. Modern philosophers such as Martin Heidegger (1869–1976) and Carl Jaspers (1883–1969), following the example of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), have amply responded to his unique epigrams and have thus underscored the huge influence which this late seventeenth-century poet continues to exert on contemporary epistemology [2]. In other words, if we can trust the judgment of such intellectual giants, then their positive responses to this Baroque poet, an intertextual partnership of an extraordinary kind, deserve to be taken very seriously also today.

Silesius was a prolific poet from Breslau in Silesia, today in southwestern Poland, and accordingly, he called himself after his home country, although his original name was Johann Scheffler. At first, he had worked as a medical doctor; later, he turned into an ordained priest and poet; altogether, he published the following works:

- 1642: *Bonus Consiliarius* (trans. as *The Good Counselor*)
- 1657: *Heilige Seelen-Lust, oder geistliche Hirtenlieder der in ihren Jesum verliebten Psyche* (trans. as *The Soul's Holy Desires, or the Spiritual Songs of the Shepherd in Your Christ-Loving Spirit*)
- 1657: *Geistreiche Sinn-und-Schlussreime zur göttlichen Beschaulichkeit* (trans. as "Ingenious Aphorisms in End-Rhymes to Divine Tranquility," or "Witty Aphorisms in End-Rhymes to Divine Tranquility"), renamed in the 2nd edition (1674) to *Cherubinischer Wandersmann* (trans. as "Cherubinic Pilgrim")
- 1675: *Sinnliche Beschreibung der vier letzten Dinge, zu heilsamen Schröken und Auffmunterung aller Menschen inn Druck gegeben. Mit der himmlischen Procession vermehrt, &c.* (trans. as. "A Sensuous Representation of the Four Last Things, printed to create a wholesome waking up and encouragement for all people.")

To these volumes, we have to add theological tracts and other writings. Although Silesius was detested by the Orthodox Protestants, especially in Breslau, and although he was viewed with much distrust by the Catholics, he found a wider readership, especially with his most unique epigrams. These appealed particularly to a spiritualist audience, mystically-influenced communities hidden under the radar screen of the Catholic Church, but my purpose here is not to invest in a religious-historical perspective. Instead, I intend to demonstrate that despite the Baroque character of these epigrams, we can identify here some of the most insightful poems that continue to appeal to us in a truly profound manner because they address, in a most condensed and concise manner, transcendental truths. As poems, they expose the explosive power of the human language to address the ineffable and to come to terms with a secret world that, as many believe, sustains our entire existence, whether we talk about (a) God or a force behind all

life.

German literary research has, of course, discussed Silesius already at length, at least in biographical and poetic terms. No literary history can afford to ignore him. But this does not mean at all that Silesius's epigrams are commonly known, appreciated, and discussed, although they should be recognized as some of the most insightful and far-reaching poetic reflections on the human self, his/her relationship with God, and the meaning of human existence in spiritual terms. Anyone invested in the exploration of the transcendence behind all material dimensions would deeply profit from Silesius's observations and literary images, and this also today. Moreover, these epigrams, as we will see, challenge even the most secular thinker/reader because of their highly sophisticated metaphorical language, often deeply grounded in modern scientific observations. They mirror mystical thoughts, they are stunningly innovative in their perception of the Godhead, and they create completely new notions of the relationship between the earthly self and a spiritual alterity.

So, the purpose here is to present a selection of his epigrams and to discuss them as thoroughly as possible because they represent truly far-reaching comments on metaphysical dimensions within a religious context [3,4]. Although Silesius has been called a mystic by some, he never claimed to have typically mystical visions and created his poetry as an intellectual theologian with his eyes set on the power of words.

2. Brief Biographical Sketch

Fortunately, we know much about Silesius, the Silesian Angel, as Johann Scheffler called himself [5], and we can closely trace his education, profession as a medical doctor, and as a poet of the famous epigrams. Born in 1624 in Breslau, today the modern Polish city of Wrocław, he studied in Strasbourg in 1643, and then he turned to medicine at the universities of Padua and Leiden. Somewhat later in life, while already professionally employed, he converted from Protestantism to Catholicism in 1652. This move angered many of his contemporaries, but Scheffler was never the kind of person to follow other people's opinions. Instead, as his entire work indicates, he was deeply influenced by the spiritualist movement strongly determined by intellectuals such as Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260–1326) and Gert Groote (1340–1384), and then Jacob Böhme (1575–1624) and Valentin Weigel (1533–1588), but he still succeeded in blazing his own path toward a mystical reflection in poetic terms. He might have never had a vision or revelation as many of his medieval predecessors had (Hildegard of Bingen, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Henry Suso, etc.), but we can be certain that he had a strong hunch of divine transcendence which he expressed in a vast body of epigrams, many of which could be almost called heretical in their innovative poetic engagement with God as the essential component of the self.

In 1654, he was appointed as Imperial Court physician under Emperor Ferdinand III, and in 1657, his first collection of epigrams appeared under the title *Cherubinic Wanderer and the Holy Joy of the Soul*. In 1661, he was ordained as a priest, and in 1664, he became court marshal under the Prince-Bishop of Breslau. The following years saw the publication of a number of new volumes of his poetry. He died in 1677. Scheffler perceived himself as a strong promoter of the Catholic Counter-Reformation, but he went considerably beyond the role of preaching and, in many ways, really became non-denominational, as we would call it today. Instead, his epigrams allowed him to formulate much deeper thoughts that were correlated to medieval mysticism and also contemporary spirituality in a profoundly ineffable manner [6].

3. Silesius is With Us Today

I myself have been able to identify a significant influence by late antique Boethius on Silesius [7,8], and we know by now that our poet subsequently influenced major philosophers, especially in the twentieth century (Heidegger and Jaspers). Silesius has been anthologized, edited, and translated, which should place his epigrams really at our fingertips, whether through critical and scholarly editions or by way of translations and adaptations [9]. Those interested in esotericism find some examples of his works even online presented in an aesthetically very pleasing version on youtube, i.e., in English translation and accompanied by harp music [10-14], but a critical discussion really still proves to be a desideratum so that we can better grasp the paradoxes and enigmas that characterize his unique approach

to the mystical epistemology of his own brand.

Significantly, as I want to argue and illustrate here, his epigrams, specifically because of their ineffable character, offer unique language, images, expressions, metaphors, and concepts that invite us to join the poet in his quest for the divine, or spiritual, component behind the material dimension. However, I do not intend to turn to preaching, to any kind of religious indoctrination, or to attempts to achieve conversion; by contrast, the task that I have set for myself will be to identify some of Silesius's epigrams as some of the best ones ever composed in the history of German literature offering perspectives toward a spiritual dimension, and this simply by means of literary strategies through which the reader is empowered to recognize what is really apophatic and yet highly relevant for the human existence in any historical period.

While medieval and early modern mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen or Catharine of Siena encountered the divine in highly personal terms, Silesius reflected upon this experience in rather theoretical and also highly visual terms, and so he might have reached equally deep, if not deeper, insights because he combined rational components with poetic expressions and drew at the same time from images borrowed from the world of the natural sciences. In this sense, he was a direct respondent to the religious and philosophical thoughts formulated by the late medieval Dominican, Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260–ca. 1328). In other words, his epigrams, because of their rhythmic nature and powerful employment of metaphors and idiomatic phrases, build meaningful bridges between the human language and the metaphysical dimension, challenging in that process human epistemology.

Of course, at first sight, these epigrams seem to be nothing but literary reflections of a Catholic mind, of a poet who wants to find God in his life and to probe poetic strategies to explore abstract terms and metaphors for the divine. But Silesius was not a mystic in the narrow sense of the word; he was certainly not a saint and not a prophet; instead, he was a poet who attempted to come to terms with the spiritual and divine through his words and to utilize the genre of poetry for his pursuit of truth, insight, and knowledge of the transcendental. We would hence go wrong if we were to read his epigrams exclusively through a religious lens, when they are really manifestations of a certainly very mystical mind deeply anchored within a philosophical discourse. Silesius engaged intimately with natural objects and phenomena and asked about their essence because the divine rests behind and within them. In this way, he turned into a poet of transcendence, which this brief article will illustrate through a close analysis of a selection of his texts. For biographical and historical aspects, I refer to previous research [15] and concentrate on his texts as literary segues to the ineffable dimension, especially because they deserve to be considered within a philosophical and religious context (for a specialized reading of the Trinity metaphors, see Hillenbrand's discussion [16].

My interest here is not focused on religious messages as such in abstract terms, although those dominate, of course, Silesius's thinking. Instead, the investigation will focus on the literary strategies employed by this poet to come to terms with the divine experience, and this, oddly, within the context of the material dimension [17]. After all, as we will see, Silesius, based on his university training also in the natural sciences, was apparently well informed about the latest scientific research and drew from that field for his own metaphors and stylistic elements (for a comparative approach, see Hammer and Le Brun's studies [18,19].

4. Analysis

Undoubtedly, Silesius aimed for the comprehension of the divine in human life. Through his epigrams, he appealed to his audience to refine their inner mind and to strengthen it, transforming it into a crystal, consisting of purest gold (I, 1). But the individual would not need any external help; instead, all that would be required would be to find the divinity and to dive into the "ungeschaffne Meer der bloßen Gottheit" (I, 3; the non-created ocean of the pure Godhead). Obviously, Silesius here refers to the time before creation when God was all and everything and had not yet allowed the manifestation of Himself in material terms. Referring to the ocean, the poet highlights the infinity and also the eternity of God, which is powerfully captured with this image of the ocean that did not yet exist. Hence, as the following epigraph indicates, anyone who wants to approach the Godhead must go far beyond any known religious ceremony and assume a status that his more than divine, meaning, to be part of God (I, 4). That

also implies a turn away from time, or rather, to a period before time, certainly a hermeneutic paradox of great significance, especially for post-modern philosophy.

Most famously, in I, 5, Silesius hence admits that he does not know what he really is, and is not what he knows, a beautiful that carries significantly the dilemma the human individual faces throughout their existence. After all, as the second line then confirms, we are a thing and yet not a thing, we are part of the universe and contribute to its existence, and yet are not it either, a powerful contradiction, which the poet then captures with the comparison of the circle which consists of endless points: "ein Stuepfchen und ein Kreis" (I, 5; a point and a circle). In mathematical terms, this implies infinitesimal calculations because the graph coming down the y-axis will never join fully the x-axis, and yet, in practical terms, it becomes one with it. By the same token, the human can only hope to approximate God, but s/he will never merge fully because we are only dots and not the full circle, an entity far beyond our comprehension.

The effort to identify God would be rewarded only when the individual tries to become God Himself and find Him in his own being because the human creature is God itself and constitutes God insofar as the body is the physical manifestation of the divine (I, 6). Silesius, however, implies even more because the right path toward God would be to acknowledge that we are nothing but the flicker of a light within the real light, or only a human word within the divine language. Anyone hoping to understand God would succeed only by way of becoming "Gott im Gotte" (I, 6, v. 4; God in God).

Silesius tries over and over again to reach out to the transcendental, although it remains incomprehensible and elusive. Nevertheless, he believes that the epistemological barrier between God and the soul is actually minimal because God rests in himself, which thus explains why the poet suggests that God cannot exist without the human creature. In other words, which no traditional religion would have accepted, once his soul would disappear, God as well would dissipate (I, 8). In a solidly Boethian fashion, the poet observes that the essence of God consists of complete self-sufficiency, i.e., lack of any need because everything has emanated from Him in the first place. But this very essence rests already in the human soul and is a shared realization (I, 9).

Medieval mystics had visions of the Godhead and expressed the greatest love for Him, but here, Silesius underscores that his own self is just as big as God is, or as small as He is. In other words, there is, ultimately, no difference or separation between the soul and God: "Ich bin wie Gott und Gott wie ich" (I, 10; I am like God, and God is like me). With endless boldness, Silesius dares to state what no one else before him had ever voiced, and especially not in that clarity: "Gott ist in mir und ich in ihm" (I, 11; God is in me, and I am in Him). Similarly, as to eternity, he encourages his readers to look beyond space and time, and only then, the next step beyond all limits toward the other world would be possible (I, 12). Even more amazing proves to be I, 13, where he identifies the human being as the incorporated eternity insofar as when the individual leaves time behind, then the merging of the self with God would be possible.

At one point, Silesius rejects everything that has ever been said about God because it would simply not be enough for the timeless effort to come to terms with the Almighty. In this way, he might have provided some inspiration for the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), who had coined the phrase of the 'superman,' the "Übermensch," which Silesius had called "Über-Gottheit" (I, 15; Super-Godhead) [20]. Considering that these epigrams had probably been standard reading material in German schools in the nineteenth century, it is highly likely that Nietzsche indeed responded to this or similar statements by the late Baroque poet. We could also draw from the fact that the German essayist, philosopher, and media theorist Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) laid the foundation for modern research of Baroque literature with his failed habilitation thesis, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, published in 1928 [21]. This renewed interest in that cultural and literary period, maybe already since the late nineteenth century, might strengthen the claim of a closer connection between Nietzsche and Silesius. To be sure, the terminology is almost identical, although the former meant it in secular terms, and the latter in religious terms.

Curiously, God would die when people die, and since death is certain for everyone, Silesius implies that God, as people trivially comprehend Him, would have to die when a person dies. But this only means that once death has oc-

curred, then the individual is privileged to join God's order or essence (I, 34). After all, once the person's life has been lost, the true life with Christ sets in. Death actually liberates the individual from the bondage here on earth (I, 35), and so he is to be praised as a friend. Death comes only so that the individual can conclude the old life cycle and embark on a new one within the spiritual context (I, 36), which might be considered, in an interreligious context, as an archetypal correspondence with Buddhist teaching.

Certainly demonstrating an influence from Meister Eckhart's philosophy, Silesius idealizes the concept of "Gelassenheit" in his epigram no. 38: "Wenn du die Dinge nimmst ohn' allen Unterscheid, / So bleibst du still und Gleich in Lieb' und auch in Leid" (no. 38; When you accept all things equally, then you remain tranquil and the same in love and sorrow; cf. the studies by Bergengruen and Lipiński [22,23]). In epigram no. 39, Silesius even picks up this term and alerts the audience that people need to submit themselves completely to the highest entity, that is, God, otherwise they would be blind to the true essence of the spiritual dimension. Turning to philosophical reflections in no. 40, the poet emphasizes that God is all Will, His own Will, and operates with His Will, and this "ohn' alle Maß und Ziel" (without any measure and goal). There is no end, no limit, no space constraint with and in God (no. 41).

Almost in a post-modern fashion, we might say, this poet attempts to reach beyond the intellectual framework humans are capable of by way of using paradoxes and abstractions that fall beyond our rationality. Hence, it makes sense when he identifies God as being infinitely high up beyond all material dimensions and being unable Himself to find any limits of His own existence (no. 42).

In fact, all rationality itself falls away in the face of God because He exists without any rational foundation or concept. Only those would fully grasp that who are an intimate part of Him (no. 43), certainly a mystical notion though, again, we could not claim that Silesius had mystical visions. Similarly, the idea of love reflects a phenomenon that cannot be described or analyzed critically: "Ich lieb ein einzig Ding und weiß nicht / was es ist" (no. 43, 1; I love one unique thing and I do not know what it is). This ineffability, however, becomes the very reason why this love goes beyond all measures and is not focused on anything specific: "Etwas" (no. 44, 2; Something). Consequently, epigram no. 45 constitutes one of the ultimate stanzas that make perfect sense because the poetic statement is meaningless on a surface level and yet infinitely meaningful at closer analysis: "Wer nichts begehrt / nichts hat / nichts weiß / nichts liebt / nichts will / // Der hat / der weiß / begehrt und liebt noch immer viel" (The person who does not desire anything, has nothing, knows nothing, and does not love and does not want anything, / does not know and desires anything, and yet still loves much). The realization that the things of this world are nothing and the transcendental is something other, incomprehensible, forceful, always present, and yet elusive, underscores much of Silesius's poems. In fact, we could claim that this very element constitutes the one moment he obviously shared with spiritualists across the world, maybe especially Buddhists [24-26]. Similarly, the poet talks about himself as the "Unding" (no. 46; the non-being) and situates himself within eternity once he has joined God (no. 47). To prepare himself for the union with God, the poet pronounces that he must abstain from all joy and sorrow; divesting oneself from all feelings would blaze the way for the encounter with God (no. 51).

But there would not be any point in striving for God, outside of the self, because God rests in us (no. 55): "Der Brunnquell ist in dir" (1; the rising up in the well is located in you). The less the individual would plead with God for His help, the closer the union would become. As the poet says in no. 56, we should not intervene in God's working; otherwise, we would insult Him. The more a person suffers from physical disabilities, the more s/he could expect to find God. Surprisingly, this also has the consequence that even the search for God is viewed as a distraction and a hindrance. Only those who would let go of everything would be able to turn into an innocent child. Otherwise, one would remain a servant and not God's beloved (no. 58). One should remove one's own will and submit oneself under God, even if one were a Seraphim angel (no. 59).

Silesius composed his epigrams like pearls on a string, playing one variation after the other, all poems ultimately addressing the same issue, the idealization of transcendence. The poet's true genius rested in his ability to create ever new images to circumscribe the essential experience of non-being and share God's own existence in one's own

self. Even if Christ were born a thousand times in Bethlehem, this would mean nothing because His birth would have to be understood metaphorically and thus would really have to take place within the individual's mind or soul to be theologically true (no. 61) [27,28].

Whereas the German poet Johann von Tepl from northern Bohemia (today, Czech Republic) had used the icon of the plowman as a metaphor for everyman in his famous dialog poem *Der Ackermann* (ca. 1400), in which the human fights argumentatively against death, Silesius switches the sides and identifies Christ as the plowman who uses his plow shares (the spirit) to prepare the field for sowing words, which then results in a harvest. The field itself is, according to this Baroque poet, the "Saeungsort" (no. 64, 2; the place for sowing), from which then grows the grain. Quite similarly, in no. 66, Silesius compares God with fire and the human heart with the oven, where the wood of vanity is consumed by the flames. Oddly, later he equates humanity with milk and the divinity with wine and encourages the reader to mix both to gain strength (no. 69).

At the same time, Silesius does not advocate for a specific religion; he does not promote Protestantism or Catholicism; instead, for him, true religion finds its best and only expression in love: "Die lieb ist unser Gott / es lebet all's durch Liebe: // Wie selig waer' ein Mensch / der stets in ihr verbliebe!" (no. 70; Love is our God; everything exists through love / a person would be blessed who could stay in it all the time). We find, as an aside, the same notion about hundreds of years later fully expressed in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's famous play dealing with tolerance, *Nathan the Wise* (1779), in which the relationship of all people across all religious divides is identified as love. However, Lessing was not concerned with religion as such but looked for ways to overcome the historical conflicts between the various faiths (Islam, Judaism, and Christianity). Silesius, by contrast, was fully invested in finding the ultimate religious truth and discovered it already here, in love. Yet, he was realistic enough to recognize that this goal of finding love was very hard to achieve. Nevertheless, he then pushes even harder and appeals to his readers to try "selbst / wie Gott / die Liebe sein" (no. 71, 2; to be, like God, love itself) [29,30].

Most intriguingly, Silesius identifies God as the being that rests in complete restfulness, not being driven by any wishes or desires, hence being self-sufficient, as Boethius had defined Him. The human individual hence should aspire for the same internal stance, leaving all wishing behind, and then s/he would be the same as God (no. 76). Considering the entire creation, the poet emphasizes that each being has its own space and should be content with that: for the bird, it would be the air, for the rock, the land, for the fish, the water, and for the human being, "mein Geist in Gottes Hand" (no. 80, 2; my spirit in God's hand). Consequently, the individual should understand that the divine spirit rests in the human soul and not outside. Thus, it would be futile to go searching for God since heaven and thus God are already situated in us (no. 82).

In several epigrams, Silesius wonders about how an individual could become like God and answers that since God is different from everything else, one ought to become like that as well, "allem ungleich," that is, to alienate oneself from this world (no. 84, 1). If one wants to listen to God's words that are spoken in oneself, it would be necessary to part from all listening abilities (no. 85) because the auditive faculty pertains only to the material listening, whereas God speaks an immaterial language and can be perceived only spiritually. Similarly, there would not be anything in this world that would be big enough to enclose the self because the latter belongs entirely to God (no. 86). It would be useless to strive for external goals because God Himself rests already in the self (no. 88). After all, as he formulates next, the soul is already couched in God and is thus situated beyond time and space (no. 89).

Finally, if an individual were able to return to the state of non-being or would never have become something, then in its dissolution, s/he would become one with God. However, for Silesius, this also means that the merging with God means that there is a new identity which can never be condemned to hell because otherwise God would condemn Himself to hell (no. 97). Embracing the notion of "Gelassenheit" (the letting go of everything and falling into God) in no. 99, Silesius stresses that he would welcome all pains just as much as all joys because the enlightened individual would understand that those pertain only to the material dimension. True spirituality could not even be touched by any such emotions.

One of the most famous epigrams deserves to be touched upon here as well, no. 102, in which the poet

draws from the world of alchemy and considers the process of transformation of lead to gold as the ultimate one, after which all external matters disappear and make room for the eternal condition because the "Zufall" (no. 102, 1; the accident), or contingency, no longer exists. At this crucial moment, cold fusion so to speak, Silesius observes, "Wann ich mit Gott durch Gott in Gott verwandelt bin" (no. 102, 2; when I am transformed with God through God into God). In parallel, in no. 104, he comments that as soon as God's fire has melted away the human being, that means, the impurities of the material dimension, then God imprints His own being onto the soul.

5. Conclusions

It would be impossible to analyze Silesius's epigrams rationally. In fact, his specific goal is to move away from rationality and to dive into the world of spirituality because the soul needs to find its home in transcendence. He defines that realm as being free from the categories of time and space, determined, filled with, and qualified by the Godhead. In the flood of epigrams, the poet explores many different angles of the soul's quest for immortality and the ability to join completely with God. However, all that cannot be fully expressed in human terms, hence the constant reliance on the paradox and even the absurd. Ultimately, then, even the attempt to grasp the ineffable through human words proves to be elusive and really impossible. This means that Silesius pushes himself and his readers toward and beyond the limits of all human language.

Here we encounter a highly gifted poet who was deeply engaged in his efforts to find poetic words for the ineffable, to situate himself in the closest possible proximity to and with God, and to describe in subtle if not unsettling terms the uncanny process of the self leaving everything behind and merging with the Godhead who then becomes the soul and exists in and through the soul. Most daringly, but poetically most impressively, even for us today, Silesius formulated highly startling comments about God being part of and within us and hence as being in need of us because we are, as his creatures, essential to Him. Nevertheless, and at the same time, the poet argued repeatedly that the self had to dissolve and leave all material aspects behind, including space and time, in order to facilitate this merging. The human soul could not be fettered to the body, as Silesius says in no. 118, but instead, it needs to return to the very origin of all creation to find God once again. The human soul is Christ's own blood (no. 120) and thus recognizes by way of the spiritual transformation that its essence is in fact God Himself.

Although there would not be any reasonable or comprehensible words for transcendence, Silesius succeeds after all in formulating what is otherwise not expressible. For instance, God is, according to no. 133, "ein ew'ges Nun" (an eternal now), and the human being, according to no. 146, the sum of all things here on earth. Even in the most mundane circumstances, transcendental elements enter the picture, so in no. 161: "Ich bin ein ewig' Licht / ich brenn' ohn Unterlaß / // Mein Docht und Oel ist Gott / mein Geist / der ist das Faß" (I am an eternal light, I burn without an ending // My wick and oil are God, my Spirit is the vessel). Each time, the chosen words require intensive investigations and reflections, whether we might agree with Silesius or not. His epigrams transcend the traditional function of the human language, although his expressions tend to be rather simple and even mundane at first sight. The difficulties do not rest in the formulations, but in the hidden ideas, such as those pertaining to "Gelassenheit." In no. 164, for instance, we learn that the angel gazes at God with tranquility or equanimity, but once the human soul lets God go, i.e., abandons his quest for the divine – almost a contradiction to everything he had argued about beforehand – then this increases this equanimity manyfold.

Silesius's epigrams prove to be highly provocative and seductive, inviting ever new readings and probing of the meaning, especially because no traditional theological approach proves to be useful for the desired interpretation. A final example from among hundreds more would be no. 179, where the human being is identified as the origin of God's streams that are to flow out into the world. If the self hence is supposed to be the well of those streams, it must not dry up, which entails that the human being is recognized as part and parcel of the divine and as being intimately involved in the creative process behind all beings. There would be much to think and say about it, whether we agree or disagree with this statement [31,32].

In this way, we recognize in Silesius' epigrams true masterpieces of Baroque poetry that are, however, not lim-

ited by the stylistic and conceptual notions typical of that period. We could not identify them as expressions by a Protestant or a Catholic poet. Instead, as we have seen, the poet intriguingly formulated profound religious and philosophical statements pertaining to a universal religious experience through the countless images that circle God, the human being, time, place, and the word, and elements of nature.

Thus, this poet emerges as one of the most significant contributors to the history of German literature since the late seventeenth century, offering thoughts and insights that push all our limits in intellectual, religious, and aesthetic terms [33,34].

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