

Gennadij Ajgi's Poetic Mysticism of Trees: On the Motif of Willows

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Abstract Natural phenomena appear in almost every poem of Ajgi and develop a specific semiotics that evolves over the course of his career. Ajgi very often turns to trees. The trees are signatures of the speaker's mutually changing relationship with nature and God. The mystical path to the experience of God takes place in transformations that can be traced by the changes in the poetic representation of the trees. As the willow-poems demonstrates, the mystical path to the experience of God in Ajgi's work leads from the pantheistic and immanent to the Christian and transcendent.

Keywords Gennadij Ajgi. Nature Poetry. Mysticism. Trees. Willows.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Willows. – Mediator of the Experience of the Divine. – 3 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

The Chuvash poet Gennadij Ajgi (1934-2006) is one of the 'new classics' of Russian-language literature. He creates a poetic mysticism around the experience of a deeper dimension of being, often characterized as divinity.¹ The poetic representations of Ajgi's mystical views change over the course of his life, passing through four phases. In the first and second phases, mystical experience shone its brightest (cf. Stahl 2016):

1. The early period of the 1950s and 1960s is pantheistic.
2. At the end of the 1960s, there is a noticeable transition to a transcendental worldview, which shows a growing affinity with the Christian theology that he had previously rejected.
3. At the beginning of the 1980s, a break in the mystical path becomes apparent, and the mystical themes recede.
4. At the beginning of the 2000s, the memory of his earlier mystical work awakens. These echoes come alongside the foreboding of approaching death.

Nature plays a central role in Ajgi's poetic mysticism, not only reflecting his views but rather serving as a mediator that connects the human and the divinity.

Natural phenomena occur in almost every poem of Ajgi. Each natural phenomenon thereby develops a specific semiotics that evolves over the course of his career. Poems are often dedicated to flowers – first and foremost, to the rose or dog rose, or to phlox and jasmine. But, even more often, Ajgi turns to the forest, trees, and bushes. In an interview, Ajgi reported that field and forest are related to his homeland, a Chuvash village, making up “*весь мой мир*” (my whole world) and “*приобретали все более символический характер*” (gaining an increasingly symbolic character; Ajgi 2019, 314). Korčagin makes the worthy remark that the trees in Ajgi's poems often form a “boundary between field and sky” and “call the subject to unite with them”, but “this unification never takes place” (Korčagin 2016, 115). The latter assumption, however, as we shall see, cannot be agreed with in principle, for, in certain poems of the first and second phases, there is very certainly a mystical union with trees and through them with the divinity, but this is in fact no longer imagined as possible in later poems.

Ajgi projects his mystical insights onto the trees in a special way, whereby the forest and certain trees represent different mystical

All translations are by the Author. I would like to thank David Hock for his help with the linguistic improvement of the article, especially with the translation.

¹ Mysticism as experiencing the Divine is not unrelated to theological knowledge, cf. on this, for example, Haas 1996, 33.

aspects. In his poetry, there appear a wide variety of trees: the aspen or poplar, the rowan, the apple tree, the fir, the hawthorn bush, as well as the oak and maple. But the most common images are of the forest itself and of three species: birches, pines, and willows. The poems about one of these species can build up the logic of a series, insofar as the later poems refer to the earlier ones. Furthermore, there is an evolution to be observed in Ajgi's turn towards certain tree species as subject-matter at specific moments in his life and career.

The forest and trees only became central themes in the second phase of his work, concretely beginning from 1967. At first, the forest itself or also special 'places' (*месма*) in the forest, such as clearings that were perhaps inhabited by a single bush (the hawthorn)² emerged as the main focus of his poems from 1967 to 1972. Increasingly, however, forests and clearings are represented as a place for the revelation of the Divine Trinity. From 1972 to about 1977, more and more poems focus on the birch tree, the perhaps most Russian tree. It stands for the soul, which has become pure, chaste, and simple, and is connected to heaven through its light branches and fine leaves. Then, from 1977 to 1979, the pine comes to the fore. Despite Russian tradition, in which the pine is linguistically feminine, it is a male tree in Ajgi's poems. For Ajgi, the pine bears the signature of God the Father, the Creator. In his poems on the pine tree, Ajgi transitions to the third phase of his development with the experience of God's abandonment and absence. In the final poems of this period, in which an upheaval in mystical experience occurs, the willow is representative. It, in turn, is the mother-tree.

Although the willow is chronologically the first of the three species to make an appearance in Ajgi, beginning in 1964 (cf. 1: 140),³ it is also the last to play a major role in his poetry. Thus, in considering its various representations across these years, the development of Ajgi's tree mysticism as a whole may be charted *in nuce*. This development progresses from the experience of God in nature to the transcendence of God and then to the loss of the experience of God, before hope finally arises for its recuperation. Therefore, I have chosen the transformation of the willow motif in Ajgi's poems for a close reading.

² Schmitt (2022, 432) points out that Ajgi picks up on the view of Chuvash folk belief that "a solitary tree standing in the field was often regarded as the abode of the Kiremet, a deity of ambivalent character".

³ In the following, the work of Ajgi 2009 (7 vols) is cited only by volume and page number.

2 Willows – Mediator of the Experience of the Divine

Ajgi uses three different names for the silver willow (*Salix alba*) throughout his poetic work: beginning with *ветла*⁴ (1964), then *верба* (from 1975 to 1979), and, finally, *ува* (from 1979 to 1982). Both the poems about *верба* and the poems about *ува* can be read as a coherent series. These poems have in common that the willow conveys contact with the Divine. Furthermore, it is consistently linked to the motif of the mother as well as directly or indirectly to the memory of childhood. But the concept of the willow is evolving, reflecting a transformation in Ajgi's poetic mysticism. Let us now examine these phases.

2.1 ветла – Mystical Union

The poem in which the willow – here called *ветла* – first plays a key role does not bear the name of the tree in its title: *константин леонтьев: утро в оптинной пустыни* (*konstantin leont'ev: utro v optinoj pustyni*, 'morning in the optina pustyn'; 1: 140-1). In this poem, Ajgi brings to mind the religious philosopher Konstantin Leont'ev, who becomes the *alter ego* of the speaker. The poem was probably triggered by Ajgi's visit to the site of Optina Pustyn'. This is an Orthodox monastery of the Elders or старцы, which Dostoevsky also visited and to which he pays tribute in his novel *Brothers Karamazov*. The archetype for the character Zosima in that novel is a famous elder of this monastery, Amvrosij. Leont'ev was in close contact with Amvrosij and criticized his portrayal in the figure of Zosima (cf. Leont'ev 2003, 816). Leont'ev himself emphasizes what most impressed him about Amvrosij: the "*прежде всего Церковн<ая> мистика*" (first of all ecclesiastical mysticism – Leont'ev 2021, 106; italics in the original), that connected him to the tradition of Hesychasm and the prayer of the heart.⁵ And this connection is the basis of Ajgi's poem.

Ajgi may have in mind Leont'ev's autobiographical essay (cf. Leont'ev 2003, 791-804), in which Leont'ev describes the importance of his mother for the development of his understanding of religious mysticism. Thus, the poem begins with a memory of childhood and the mother. This memory facilitates a Hesychastic act of union with the Divine: the repeated utterance of the Russian verb *есть* – meaning either the third person singular '[it] is', or the infinite verb 'to be' – is associated with 'being' as such and is here situated in the image of an action that is nonsensical and, accordingly, can only be approximated:

⁴ Ajgi uses punctuation and capitalization according to his own poetic purpose and not to grammar.

⁵ On the tradition of the prayer of the heart, cf. my explanations in Stahl 2019b, 125-40.

“есть” – повторяешь – как будто в себя помещаешь | светящее место: || – о есть! – (1: 140; italics in the original)

“it is” – you are repeating – as if you were making room in yourself | for a luminous place: || – o it is! –

In the Hesychastic prayer of the heart, it is the name of Jesus that is transferred from the head to the heart by repeated praying. This form of spiritual communion with Jesus Christ can be connected in the Hesychastic tradition with appearances of light: this ‘place’, the ‘is’ or ‘being’, shine through in the poem.

And here the willow comes into play. The willow stands for the culmination of the mystical experience: on the one hand, this experience leads out of time (“и – не накапливая | что-нибудь – возраст творящее”, ‘and – without compiling | something – that is creating age’, 1: 141) and, on the other hand, out of a closed space (“за окном”, ‘behind the window’ – 1: 141). The motif of the window, behind which the willow appears, indicates the transition from normal consciousness to another state.⁶ The speaker imagines moving out of the window into the willow itself. The ambivalent grammatical construction allows the markedly capitalized verbal adverb ‘Shaking’ to refer simultaneously to the willow, the place of light, and the speaker. In this way, inside and outside, man and nature merge: “вместе с верхушками ветел себя Сотряся” (along with the topmost parts of the willows Shaking – 1: 141). The capitalization emphasizes the sacred nature of the mystical union. Here, we have also a special experience of light, which is compared with a ‘child’s Christmas tree’, ‘Scattering both light and dust’ (“Сыплет и светом и пылью | как детская ель! –”; 1: 141) – i.e. the fruit dust of the willow catkins, which is golden yellow.

The mystical experience is thus represented at once as the speaker’s union with the willow and as the birth of the Lord within the speaker’s mind. This unity is an experience of the immanence of transcendence. The experience of deeper being is portrayed as at once spiritual and sensual in the ambiguity of the predicate: it is ‘self-explanatory – *what i s*’ (the sensual or concrete) and ‘*that it i s*’ (the spiritual or being itself), unified in a single Russian verb form, *е с т ь* (“самообъяснимо – что есть”; 1: 141; italics added).

Let us now look at the poems on willow as *верба*.

⁶ Schmitt (2022, 444) points out that Ajgi’s use of the window motif ties in with the Chuvash folk belief that “the window symbolized the threshold between this world and the hereafter”.

2.2 верба – The Golden Soul

The willow under the rather vernacular name *верба*, which often appears in folklore, is used in four poems written between 1975 and 1979. In the first poem *поле: куст вербы* (*pole: kust verby*, 'field: willow-bush' – 2: 98), dated 11 May 1975, the willow is linked to 'Glow of the World's Golden Hour:' ("и в Сияньи Золотого Часа Мира:", *i v Sijan'i Zolotogo Časa Mira* – 2: 98).

The 'golden hour' usually refers to sunrise or sunset. The willow bush unites with the golden light or the golden time via the hyphen word *Куст-как-час* (Bush-as-hour), while the combination of 'glow' and 'knowledge' (*сиянье-ведение*, or 'glow-knowing') identifies spirit and nature with each other. This knowledge appears as the objective presence of spirit ('glow-knowing') – the echo of the capitalized 'Glow' – and it presents itself at once as the intellectual activity of people ("ведают иль нет?", 'do they know or not?'), with the implication that speaker himself certainly does. Moving from the sun's 'Glow' to the '1-Bush' (*Куст-1*), to the field and from that bush into the field itself, the speaker's gaze draws a standing cross with the '1-Bush' at its center.⁷ When the gaze turns from the bush back to the height of the horizon ("из края Поля – вширь"), (from the edge of the Field – into the wideness); parentheses in the original), the speaker has shifted his position; now he is located within the bush, i.e. he merges with it, as we have already seen in the previous poem.

Thus, this poem also shows a mystical union with the willow, which is at the same time a union with Christ, inasmuch as the bush represents, as it did for Moses, a mediator of theophany – here not with God but with Christ. While the cross, drawn by the speaker's gaze, stands for death, Christ's resurrection is indicated by the 'Glow'. It is perhaps not coincidental that the date of the poem's composition was a Sunday in 1975. The Sunday after Easter, on which the poem is dated, is St. Thomas Sunday, because on that day, Christ appeared to the unbelieving Thomas, for which it is also named *Антунасха* (Anti-Easter), or *Красная горка* (Red Hill). The negative connotation associated with 'Anti-Easter' is further unfolded in the poem. The loneliness of the bush emphasizes its separation. In medicine, the 'golden hour' also describes the short period in which resuscitation or life-saving treatment from a critical trauma is possible.

This ambivalence of death and its overcoming by resurrection and revelation corresponds to the poem's pause structure. Most lines end

⁷ The centred printed form (which includes title as well as dating) with alternating short and long verses, between each of which a blank space is placed, gives the poem a visually distinct character, which is also underlined by the spelling for 'one' as the number '1'. Various associations are possible, including the willow bush itself, but also the suggestion of an orthodox cross, which has three bars.

with a colon that connects the lines but at the same time underscores their interruption, which is also emphasized by the blank lines that set each verse separately, just as the bush stands alone. The contrast of connection and separation is repeated with the two sentences in parentheses, shifting attention from the phenomenon to the speaker, who does not name himself with personal pronouns. A kind of pendulum movement arises: on the one hand, the speaker is in the phenomenon, i.e. outside of himself; on the other hand, the parentheses signal his self-reflection, his being within himself. Thus, the mystical union with nature already begins to display signs of alienation.

In the subsequent poem, *ветка вербы в окне* (*vetka verby v okne*, 'willow branch in the window' – 3: 126-9), written in 1976, this break comes to the fore. Of the whole willow bush, only one branch remains, which was possibly cut off and hung in the window. The focus is thus no longer directed by natural phenomena themselves but by their effects on the soul: the soul 's h i n e s g o l d e n', merging with the willow branch 'in the window's square!' ("д у ш а з о л о т и т с я | в к в а д р а т е о к н а!" – 3: 126). As in other poems, the soul is not assigned to the speaker, even though the connection is obvious. However, Ajgi thereby suggests that the soul is more than a psychic inwardness bound to a particular body; it is at the same time beyond the person.⁸ Here, the soul forms the interface and transition between inside and outside in uniting with the willow branch. This union no longer occurs beyond the window – i.e. beyond the 'house' of the body – but on the border of inside and outside: 'in the window', which is to say, in the act of perception. Accordingly, it is during this period in Ajgi's work that the birch, consistently a metaphor for the human soul, becomes increasingly important. And, as a result of this internalization, death – and, with it, contemporary history – suddenly break into natural-mystical experience: in this case, with the news of the passing of the poet Konstantin Bogatyrev, who presumably died shortly following a beating by the KGB.⁹ It is from this death that the poem proceeds; and, from now on, a rupture is more or less clearly inscribed in the willow poems.

A year later, in 1977, Ajgi wrote a poem for his son Konstantin, a toddler at the time, titled *дом за городом [сыну константину]* (*dom za gorodom [synu konstantinu]*, 'house outside the city [for my son]; 3: 149). This poem quotes a line from the previous poem, *ветка вербы в окне* (*vetka verby v okne*), adding a line break after 'soul' and replacing the final exclamation mark with a colon: 'the soul | s h i n e s g o l d e n | in the window square:' ("д у ш а |

⁸ Cf. Korčagin 2016, 122, who also observes in other poems the division of the speaker into 'subject' and 'soul', the latter of which, unlike the former, can be located outside the body.

⁹ Vojnovič 1993, 111-15. Ajgi touches on his death in several poems.

з о л о т и т с я | в квадрате окна:"). The soul, which is highlighted in the blocked print, 'shines golden' 'but from the Homeland-of-Life | other | hidden' ("а из Родины-Жизни | иной | затаенной"), that is, the prenatal otherworld. And this "golden shine" is at the same time the blossom of the willow catkin, which in turn has an echo in the babbling of the baby. Through this synesthetic correspondence, the willow acquires an acoustic quality for the first time.

The 'secret meeting' ("тайная встреча") of the flowering willow and the baby's babbling takes place 'in that - immaculate - Homeland' ("в той - незапятнанной - Родине"), that is, in the spiritual dimension. This encounter, however, is reflected in the golden glow that connects inside and outside, this world and the other: for the soul 'appears golden' again 'in the window', not behind or beyond. Thus, the union of soul and the golden glow of the catkins forms the boundary or threshold between inside and outside, but it is a boundary that is transparent and that connects. As it connects inside and outside, the 'soul' unites child, the willow in sunlight, and also the speaker, who experiences this mystical union in his perception of the willow.

In this poem, no catastrophe breaks in, and the willow is thematized again as a whole, not just as a branch. But the poem nevertheless suggests that, in contrast, to the immaculateness of the 'hidden' 'Homeland-of-Life', the spiritual or prenatal, the real world is precisely not immaculate - i.e. not without sin. And, in contrast to life, which is assigned to the otherworldly homeland, death is suggested to be the master of the world on this side. Already, the title of the poem *дом за городом* (*dom za gorodom*; 'house outside the city') shows a contrasting emphasis on being 'outside'. Symbolically, the city stands for normal life, and the house in the countryside for the *Родины-Жизни* (Homeland-of-Life), or the beyond. This poem, too, is thus sublimely inscribed with the rupture that had become explicit in the previously mentioned work.

The last poem on the willow as верба, from 9 March 1979 and dedicated to Antoine Vitez, entitled *и: верба цветом* (*i: verba cvetet*; 'and: the willow blossoms' - 2: 114) also shows traces of this break. For the first time, it explicitly focuses on the femininity of the tree: the *Матери-Древе* ('Mother-Tree') is equivalent to the *мама-синуца* ('mother-tit'), the species of bird that flies around in it - and, with its yellow belly plumage, it appears like the yellow-haired catkins of the willows themselves. But the 'we' of the poem, the writers, are described with *отклонение* (deviation) and *ветр* (wind), the image of the spirit. The speaker remains inside of the house and in front of the window. He no longer transposes himself through the window to the willow, nor does he unite with the willow 'in the square of the window', as did the 'soul' in the poems discussed earlier. Of the former unity of the 'golden soul' with the willow, only a possible remainder survives as 'flying warmth' that the wind 'may' possess ("ветр [...] (с неким быть может летучим теплом)").

However, the speaker can now synesthetically hear the 'silk whisper' of the willow buds ("комочки [...] - шепот шелковый"). Instead of being united with nature, he appears now as its interpreter. The acoustic perception of the willow, its rustling in the wind, which was first indicated in the previous poem, is taken up and intensified. The speaker understands that the willows whisper from the primordial mother, the 'Mother-Tree' ("о Матери-Древе"). In Russian, the word for virgin, *дева*, also resounds hidden within the Church Slavonic form of the word 'tree' or *дерево*, and the willow is sublimely associated with the Mother of God, behind whom the pagan goddess Natura herself may loom in Christian tradition. Thus, in this poem, the mystical unity with the willow, as observed in the earlier poems, is replaced by a distance, which is bridged only by the translation and reflection of the speaker.

The association of the *верба* with the mother and the Virgin Mary will return in the poems on the willow in which it is referred to as *ива* and which follow below. Here, the gap between the subject and nature or the Divinity - and the task of transcending this gap - becomes the central theme, further developing the idea of translating from nature through poetic meditation.

2.3 ИВЫ – Transcending to the Spirit

Ajgi wrote four poems in which the willow as *ива* is the titular and central figure of the poem. The first poem *ивы* (*ivy*; willows - 5: 52) was written in 1979 and focuses on the question of overcoming the gap between subject and object, or speaker and nature, in the act of poetic imagination. The meditative character of the poem is emphasized by its processuality, which is formally expressed in the use of present tense, the absence of blank lines or spatial indications of pause, long line structures, and strong enjambments. Furthermore, the introduction of the poem is repeated in the middle of the poem and in the middle of the line, so it is not announced by a formal break (cf. Stahl 2021; 2022).

The poem begins with a change of consciousness, an imagined sleep that transports the speaker to the willows: "ивы такие: уснуть!" (willows are like that: fall asleep!). The transition to the willows is described as spatially spherical: "окружиться | ЖИВЫМ будто вздох серебром" (surround yourself | with living silver, like a breath). The formation of spheres takes place through the breath (*вздох*), the medium of the word, which, when exhaled, appears as a silver cloud of hoarfrost. The silver of the breath is at the same time the color of the willows, while the breath is in turn associated with the wind that moves their leaves. The word 'вздох' also denotes both a sigh of sorrow and of joyful liberation. These contrary emotions unfold over the course of the poem.

First, however, the speaker and the tree merge for the word *взддох* ('breath', 'sigh'), which is connected with the speaker and is phonetically transformed into the word for 'shudder': *взддрогнуть*. The infinitive *взддрогнуть* grammatically refers to the speaker, but, semantically, it can also be related to the movement of the willow leaves:

взддрогнуть и листья узнать словно шепот в блистании линий
(вновь - воскрешаемый солнцем) (5: 52)

shudder and recognize the leaves like a whisper in the glittering
of lines (again - resurrectable by the sun)

The speaker wants to read in these leaves - which in Russian share an etymology with the word for a sheet of paper. The leaves (*листья*) are transformed phonetically into a 'glittering' (*блистание*). The shining of the leaves, created by sunlight, is at the same time an image of understanding. The glittering (*блистание*) passes phonetically into the lines (*линей*) - i.e. writing. Thus, the glittering, accompanied by the whispering or rustling of the leaves, represent at once a natural phenomenon and the intellectual act of understanding and writing.

The content of the willows' whisper forms the center of the poem. Here, the ambivalence of the 'sigh' (*взддох*) unfolds: it is

о мягком тумане-призренье - слезами в мире серебрящегося
| детства бесстрастного!

about soft fog-care - like tears in the world | of dispassionate child-
hood ensilvering itself!

The speaker learns about his childhood in the whispering of the willow. This process of remembering is characterized by both peace of mind and care. Thus, the sigh turns from an exhalation, which had transposed the speaker into the willow, into an inhalation - i.e. into memory. However, this memory appears wistful, even sad. As the sphere of connection disperses, it becomes tears. The willow awakens the memory of the deceased mother but without the speaker consciously recognizing this memory.¹⁰ The association of the willow with the mother will come to the speaker's consciousness explicitly only in a willow poem written a year later:

10 Ajgi (2019, 324) said that "страдание-как-тема, страдание-как-образ очень сильно связано у меня с памятью о матери" (suffering-as-theme, suffering-as-image is very much connected with the memory of my mother for me).

вдруг | понимаю что душу твою вспоминаю | в тумане вдали
наблюдая | подъёмы теперь острова перепады вершин
серебристых | ивовой рощи (5: 56)

suddenly | I understand that I remember your soul | when I in the
mist in the distance | observe the lifting now of the island the fall-
ing of the silver treetops | of the willow grove¹¹

The tears in the poem of 1979, however, are not merely sorrowful, for they shine silver, like dewdrops on the willow leaves. And the mist is not cold either – it is (still) caring and soft.

The poem is bisected when, in the middle of the line, the initial phrase is repeated: “– ивы такие: уснуть!” (willows are like that: fall asleep! – 5: 52). A new cycle of exhalation and inhalation follows. The second half of the poem further unfolds a sense of emotional ambivalence, sharpening it into a polarity at the end, as I will now show.

Thus, silver turns gray, and tears change into tiny droplets of mist or dew, likened to droplets of mercury: “серым рассеяться в ртутном по верху” (disperse yourself across the surface like gray quicksilver). Again, inside and outside, speaker and natural phenomenon, are one in this image. The pervasive sense of melancholy is amplified into grief. But, in the same line, there occurs yet another turn of mood: like the tear-dew droplets that roll over the leaves, the speaker wants to ‘roll out tenderness:’ (“и нежность прокатывать:”). The word *нежность* (tenderness) refers to the *призрение* (care) mentioned before, and both point to the mother. The willow becomes a place of remembrance for the deceased mother. In the 1980 poem already cited, the willow grove possesses “чем-то | ‘потусторонней” (something | ‘otherworldly’ – 5: 56), and, in a willow poem from 1982, Ajgi explicitly speaks of the willow as a “место мамá-обожания” (place of mother-deification – 5: 99).

At the end of the 1979 poem, the duality between inhalation, associated with memory and melancholy, and exhalation, associated with light and union with nature, comes apart. The two sides of the breath, which stand for union with and separation from nature, are distributed separately over two lines and set against each other: “нежность [...] : ту что не знали | что Духом расписывают | смертью туманят” (the tenderness [...] : that they did not know | which they paint with Spirit | which they fog with death – 5: 52).

With the separation of art and Spirit, on the one hand, and death and the natural phenomenon of fog, on the other, the speaker has ended his

11 Since Ajgi's lower and upper case is not based on grammar but on personal choice in order to distribute semantic weight, the personal pronoun 'I' should be lower case in the English translation.

mystical union with the willow – and also the poem. But the poem also contains a hidden theological level that transcends this separation.

First, we find allusions to the Trinity dispersed throughout the poem. Thus, the invisible ‘point’ of the sphere, which is not mentioned at the beginning, corresponds to the Father. The explicitly named ‘line’ is the theological terminology for the Son (Lat. *aequalitas*) (cf. Schwaetzer 2000). To the latter, traditionally, the sun is also assigned. Furthermore, the miracle of Lazarus rising from the dead is referred to by the epithet *воскрешаемый* (resurrectable). Finally, capitalization marks the ‘Spirit’ as ‘Holy’. One ‘paints’ (*расписывают*) with the Spirit – this is a verb that in Russian connotes the sacred painting of the domes and walls of a church. The Holy Spirit is traditionally responsible for revelation. In the middle of the poem, there is also a key term of Orthodox asceticism: *бесстрастного* (dispassionate) refers to *apatheia* (Gr. ἀπάθεια), a state without suffering and passions, which is assigned to Paradise – and the motif of childhood corresponds to it.

The poem unfolds the Christ theme: the silver sphere, mentioned at the beginning of the poem, decomposes into mercury-like balls and finally becomes a veil of fog that covers the plain like a shroud because the fog is formed by death (“смертью туманят”). The last word is *туманят*, or ‘to fog’, and its ending contains the letter that in Russian is identical with the personal pronoun ‘I’: ‘я’. The next and last letter is ‘т’, or the cross. This might be seen as an overinterpretation – but, in the tradition of the avant-garde, Ajgi time and again plays with the visual form of letters and also the semantic charging of individual letters.

Mercury, however, is the alchemical substance of transformation, which releases gold or the philosopher’s stone after passing through destruction. Mercury is, therefore, also an image of the death and resurrection of Christ. The Christian meaning of the Trinity supports such a reading. Finally, the (Holy) ‘Spirit’ stands graphically *above* death in the poem. The image of the willow offers a basis for this: in the willow catkins, the tree unites silver (moon and mother), mercury, and gold (or the sun, Christ). That is to say, even though death is victorious in nature, redemption is inscribed in nature in a spiritual way.

However, this theological layer of meaning is only hinted at in the poem. Meaningfully manifest and thus linguistically explicit is death. The new spiritual life lies beyond the world of sense and, therefore, cannot be manifested directly in language: for Ajgi, in this phase of his work, spiritual life is necessarily transcendent and apophatically eludes verbalization.

In each of the following three years, another poem is written on the willow as *уба*. At first, the poems expand upon aspects of death, separation, and grief. In the process, the speaker’s ‘I’ now emerges explicitly. In the first poem on *ивы* (‘ivy’, 1979), the subject is only indirectly present in the act of speaking and has not made itself visible

through personal pronouns. A year later, in 1980, the first person singular (понимаю, помню, удерживаю; 'I understand', 'I remember', 'I hold on') and the dative personal pronoun нам ('to us', 'for us') occur (5: 56). But only a faint memory of the poet's first mystical experience with the willow remains: "это одно лишь мельканье 'чего-то' из памяти" (just one 'something' from memory flashes up - 5: 56). Nonetheless, this is where there is 'the 'eternal' - like orphanhood | (invisible - awaiting us)' ("где 'вечное' - будто сиротство | (незримое - нас дожидаясь)" - 5: 57). In 1981, the speaker then laments how he has lost the ability to mystically transcend at all:

"Боже" не скажешь - о Боже с душою | что-то случилось:
рыдания | ровного нет! [...] тускло туманюсь (5: 72)

don't say "God" - with the soul, o God | something transpired: a
howl | without equal! [...] I feebly enfog myself

And, in 1982, the

облако давнее | словно с движеньями думанья [...] место мамá-
обожания [...] | мне закрывает (5: 99)

cloud of old | as it were with movements of thought [...] the place
of mother-deification [...] it covers it from me

In other words, it covers the willow mentioned in the title.¹² But, at the end of the poem, a weak reflection of the mystical experience emerges 'ensilvering itself straight through' ("насквозь серебрится" - 5: 99), which can be related both to the cloud and to the willow. Nonetheless, the speaker is not part of this luminousness; he remains separated.¹³

¹² Schmitt (2022, 448) describes the life circumstances responsible for the pessimistic turn in Ajgi's poetry in the early 1980s: "In the early 1980s, the family's happiness gradually dimmed, and the marriage ended shortly after the birth of daughter Veronika in 1983. In addition came the death or emigration of a large number of Ajgi's friends".

¹³ Three years later, in 1985, Ajgi describes that, with trees, he experienced a kind of dialogical relationship, in which he lost himself as in 'colorless darkness' ("в безцветную тьму"), and the 'absence' ("отсутствие"; italics in the original) of the 'Word' ("Слова"), but from which something 'blows towards us' ("дoveивает до нас"; italics in the original), 'to which, in us, 'clearly and in words', something - suddenly - answers' ("в нас, явно и 'словесно', что-то - вдруг - отвечает этому"; Ajgi 2019, 327). I have described this dialogic relationship elsewhere with Benjamin as an aura experience (Stahl 2019a, 140).

3 Conclusion

Trees are most often the subject of the poems in the second phase of Ajgi's work, and these trees often function as a site for the experience of the Divine. This is especially true of the willows. Ajgi's shift between the three names for the willow – *ветла*, *верба*, *ива* – corresponds with a transformation of his poetic mysticism.

The first poem, in which a willow under the name of *ветла* plays a central role (1964, 1: 140), combines mystical union with the willow tops and with Christ. From the mid-1970s on, in the poems about the willow as *верба*, the focus is shifted to the experience of natural phenomena in the soul. The strengthening of the subject is immediately followed by a break with mystical experience – which is presented, on the one hand, as the violence of the outer world, or of memory and history, and, on the other hand, as the clouding of consciousness. Overcoming this break and purifying the imagination is the topic of the 1979 poem about the willow as 'ивы', which shows how the subject-object split can be overcome again. However, using the image of breath movement, the poem displays a pendulum process that alternates between a mystical transference to nature and a return to the self. The processuality of transcending nature and self comes to the fore. In the later poems about *ивы*, this equilibrium is abandoned. The mystical euphoria regresses to depression at its loss. In the fourth and last *ива*-poem, there emerges a weak echo of the previous experiences of illumination. In the last phase of Ajgi's work, when trees no longer play a role, Ajgi's speaker once again approaches the experience of being and truth – but only through the image of the field (*поле*), which presents an apophatic relationship with transcendence.¹⁴

The trees in Ajgi's poetry are signatures of man's mutually evolving relationship with nature and with God. Ajgi's speaker struggles in the poems again and again to experience the Divine in or through nature. The mystical path to the experience of God takes place in transformations – from the pantheistic and immanent to the Christian and transcendent.

¹⁴ Cf. on the complex semiotics of 'field' in Ajgi most recently, Schmitt 2022.

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