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To See It All / To Hear It All: Michael Gira's Songs of Experience

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Abstract. Between 2012 and 2016, the American experimental rock band Swans, led by the vocalist, multi-instrumentalist and visionary Michael Gira, released a monumental trilogy of albums comprising *The Seer*, *To Be Kind*, and *The Glowing Man*. The lyrics on all of them portray Gira's own search for identity, with the result being a peculiar version of spirituality that is both philosophically religious and ideologically anti-religious. Forced to exist in the hostile, incomprehensible and spiritually-barren reality, the artist finds himself alienated in the state of the end of childhood and loss of innocence. In other words, he locates his identity in this final stage of spirituality and primal religion that could be named post-Christianity. Although in his bleak and emotionally absorbing lyrics Gira draws from various sources, it seems that William Blake's contrasting concepts of innocence and experience occupy a privileged position here. When the British poet believed in the coexistence of these two phenomena – or constant frictions between them that result in a kind of a revitalizing force – Gira situates himself in the latter sphere that he envisions as raging chaos. However, he does seem to find a way out of this state in the idea of a somehow utopian return to innocence.

The article is an attempt to read Gira's contemporary disillusionment with humanity's omnipotence through Blake's similar doubts in a civilization based on the false belief in human potential. In *Vala, or The Four Zoas* the poet asks: "What is the price of Experience? do men buy it for a song / Or wisdom for a dance in the street?" The present answer can be that Blake's ascertainments are still potent and alive in Michael Gira's post-Christian visions.

Key words: Swans, William Blake, post-Christianity, innocence–experience dichotomy, visionary poetry, rhythm

1. ROCK POET (INTRODUCTION)

William Blake's visionary poetry has been exerting immense influence on rock artists for decades. To enumerate just the most prominent ones, it is absolutely necessary to mention Patti Smith's performative poetry,¹ Marianne Faithfull's quoting "The Tyger" on *Dangerous Acquaintances* (1981),² Dead Can Dance's eponymous debut album from 1984,³ Tangerine Dream's renditions of some of Blake's poems from *Songs of Innocence and Experience* and *America a Prophecy* on the album *Tyger* (1987),⁴ Bruce Dickinson's absorbing rereading of some of Blake's prophetic works on *The Chemical Wedding* (1998),⁵ or the recent infamous diptych of U2's *Songs of Innocence* (2014) and *Songs of Experience* (2017).⁶ The point of this paper is, however, that it is the band called Swans, led by the charismatic Michael Gira, that manages to reuse Blake's impact in the most artistically successful way. Although Blake's aura is noticeable throughout their entire career, spanning for over four decades, it is mostly the monumental trilogy of the albums comprising *The Seer* (2012), *To Be Kind* (2014), and *The Glowing Man* (2016) that makes the comparison between Blake's and Gira's artistic approaches justified.

While for other rock artists, including the already mentioned ones, Blake's uncompromising spirituality and dense, multidimensional poetry is just an immediate source of influence – in other words, it constitutes their artistic destination – for Gira it is the starting point, the moment in time and space which marks the beginning of his journey into the unknown. Blake's influence operates here in the terms of the foundations on which Gira builds his own prophetic and yet highly original poetry, as well as his philosophical system. It is the poetry and the thought that are rooted in Blake's, but also meander to explore completely new and contemporary grounds. These are the grounds on which the strong and very often controversial vision meets the basic need for kindness and love; the grounds where the sensitive individual – the artist in the era of mass production – struggles to find his place in the world of spirituality-barren post-Christianity. As he avows in "Lunacy," the opening song of the cycle: "In the mind of no one: forming sun, forming love" (Swans 2012).

¹ She begins "My Blakean Year" from one of her later albums, *Trampin'* (2004), stating: "In my Blakean year / I was so disposed / Toward a mission yet unclear / Advancing pole by pole," to finish the song, after describing a full circle, in the following way: "So throw off your stupid cloak / Embrace all that you fear / For joy shall conquer all despair / In my Blakean year" (Smith 2004).

² In "Eye Communication" from this album, she sings probably the most famous lines written down by Blake: "Tyger Tyger, burning bright, / In the forests of the night: / What immortal hand or eye, / Could frame thy fearful symmetry?" (Blake 1977: 125).

³ This short passage from the song "Wild in the Woods" may justify it: "Listen, child, try to understand / All is not what it appears to be in the world at hand / Here dreams are bought and sold for a price / The truth a burden to keep for the rest of your life" (Dead Can Dance 1984).

⁴ These include: "The Tyger," "Smile," "America a Prophecy," "The Fly" and "London."

⁵ Additionally, the cover art of this album features Blake's painting *The Ghost of a Flea* which the artist completed between 1819 and 1820.

⁶ These albums are called infamous for the two reasons; firstly, the lyrical references to Blake's poetry are too far-fetched; secondly, the musical contents represent the band's decline in artistic powers.

2. RARE BIRDS

Gira formed Swans in 1982 as a part of the New York-based no-wave scene,⁷ and from that year – with a long hiatus from 1997 to 2010 – the band continues to explore the musical territories of post-punk, experimental music and post-rock, to enumerate just these three most obvious genres. Actually, this generic categorization does not seem to be relevant in reference to Swans' music, because "Gira prefers that we describe his group's music as its own ground, as if the Swans' music transcends the pragmatic functions of language, as if the codes embedded within the music – the tones, the rhythms, the disharmonies – represent a discernible meaning only at the moment of their production and playback" (Gunn 1999: 31). Throughout all these decades – and that applies to the leader's solo and side-projects as well – Gira indefatigably walks his artistic path that does not know cheap compromises and questionable decisions. Whether he produces brutal, industrial and rough sounds which characterize Swans' early albums, or the more atmospheric, airy and ambient music of the band's recent years, Gira remains himself, i.e. the extraordinary visionary of rock music. This semi-prophetic quality – both in the case of music and lyrics accompanying it – is especially detectable in the albums created in the 21st century, after the band's revitalization.

In 2010 Swans returned in a new incarnation – by many critics considered their best – with four studio albums. Although the first one – *My Father Will Guide Me up a Rope to the Sky* (2010) – contains excellent music, it is just a prelude to what follows, and that is the progression of the subsequent three albums, now hailed the uncompromising masterpieces of contemporary rock music. Released in exact two-year-long intervals, the monumental trilogy comprises *The Seer* (2012), *To Be Kind* (2014), and *The Glowing Man* (2016). Each album lasts the entire two hours and brings music that may be decoded as the quintessence of Swans' creativity so far, and as something completely new at the same time – Gira's most successful foray into the field of transcendence. Consequently, the lyrics on these albums are as important as the music – they portray the individual's search for identity in the hostile, incomprehensible and spiritually-barren reality. The result is a peculiar version of spirituality. People of the western culture – Gira suggests – exist in the era of post-Christianity, in the Blake-inspired state of the end of childhood and loss of innocence. However, it is possible to break this stalemate.

3. TO SEE IT ALL

William Blake states: "He who does not imagine in stronger and better lineaments, and in stronger and better light than his perishing mortal eye can see does not imagine at all" (qtd. in Ackroyd 1995: 288). Certainly, this ability to imagine, to see what things are like beyond our rational perception of the world is central for the poet. "Introduction" from *Songs of Experience* begins in the following way:

Hear the voice of the Bard,
Who present, past, and future, sees;

⁷ Explaining the choice of this name, Gira states that Swans are "majestic beautiful looking creatures with really ugly temperaments" (qtd. in Lennon 2016).

Whose ears have heard
 The Holy Word
 That walked among the ancient trees. (Blake 1977: 117)

Following his train of thought, we can say that insight constitutes who one really is, becoming the ultimate and total experience of an individual. Tadeusz Sławek notes in reference to Blake's poetry and vision: "Totality is this moment when our vision is characterized by clarity allowing us to notice what, so far, has been sealed as 'usual' or 'every day.' Totality is another name for the result of the process of 'cleansing the doors of perception' (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*), the moment of 'seeing infinity in an hour' (*Auguries of Innocence*) the area where a transition from experience to innocence takes place" (1985: 29-30).

Putting the innocence–experience dichotomy apart for the time being, it is worth noticing that this semi-prophetic quality, nowadays rather undesired and outdated, also constitutes the core of Michael Gira's artistic activity. In one of the most significant songs from the entire trilogy, the one that gives the title to the album opening it, "The Seer," he sings: "I see it all" (Swans 2012).⁸ Although this is the only phrase in this 30-minute-long song, the way it is repeated countless – or even infinite – times results in a mantra-like experience that is supposed to lift listeners/readers onto a higher level of receiving arts and comprehending the surrounding reality, just as Ralph Waldo Emerson's approach to receiving nature and sensing the absolute. The American philosopher states: "I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God" (1983: 10). Gira's main devices that trigger something unknown and unnamed in his audience are sound and music. It is organic repetition – "the intentional reproduction of a rhythm" (Barthes 1991: 248) – through which becoming part of a larger entity is plausible. As he explains this philosophy: "When the music reaches a certain point, a crescendo, it's a beautiful thing. So you pursue it. ... Just let the music take over. ... Allow the trajectory of the sound to take over and follow it" (qtd. in Lennon 2016). However, it is still the pure, unspoiled eye that remains the main vehicle for the (in)sight.

In *The Cloud of Unknowing*, an anonymous mystical text from the 14th century that exerted a huge influence on Gira, we read: "Memory or thinking of any creature that ever God made, or of any of their deeds either, it is a manner of ghostly light: for the eye of thy soul is opened on it and ever fixed thereupon, as the eye of a shooter is upon the prick that he shooteth to" (2014: 14). It is precisely the eye of the soul which is used to see non-bodily things that Gira attempts to get access to with the help of his music and his poetry. "Song for a Warrior" – sung in a duet with Karen O. – begins with such lines: "There is a growing golden light: a flower unfolding behind the mirror of your eyes" (Swans 2012). The capability of seeing ceases to be an ordinary bodily function: the eye opens for the external, the unexpected, the other. As *The Cloud of Unknowing* continues: "... all bodily thing is subject unto ghostly thing, and is ruled thereafter, and not contrariwise" (2014: 52). In "Avatar" – the title itself very meaningful – there follows a

⁸ The music perfectly accompanies the text: "It's an event, like a Wagnerian opera, a marathon dictating complete surrender – music so simultaneously cerebral and dynamically physical you can feel it in your muscles, your belly and bowels. ... It's the voice of an oracle witnessing the horror and splendor of the divine in real time" (Wilson 2014).

litany of only slightly modified statements, all of them built around the following lines: “Your light is in my hand. Your mind is in my eye. Your mind is in my mind. Your eye is in my eye” (Swans 2012). The artist⁹ gets united with the receiver of his arts, the physical side of our existence (re)connects with the transcendent one, and the act of seeing becomes a communion of our shared experiences. The narrator of Michael Gira’s short story “When I Ate my Wife” states: “Everything merges eventually – everything is organic. It’s impossible to distinguish one thing from another thing” (Gira 1995: 35). The same happens to the vision and to those who have it – it becomes a total experience that spiritually connects the illuminati. This state is even more visible in “Screen Shot” where Gira shouts out a list of words that initially may seem completely unconnected: “Love, child, reach, rise, sight, blind, steal, light, mind, scar, clear, fire, lean, right, pure, kind, sun, come, sky, tar, mouth, sand, teeth, tongue” (Swans 2014). Actually, there is a correspondence between these words: they are the sensual and highly minimalistic representations of our existence; it is this haphazard conglomerate that provides us with a definition of who we really are – creatures driven by instincts and limited by senses.

4. TO HEAR IT ALL

The sense of (in)sight is not the only one that gives Gira access to a higher level of his existence. Linking music directly to poetry – building the bridge between a sound and a word – he achieves the state of synesthesia which is also crucial for Blake. In the case of the British artist, it is the interplay between a word and an image. Peter Ackroyd: “He was sculpting words as if they were as much images of his ideas as the illustrations beside them; he was seeing words as discrete objects, not as transparent signifiers of meaning. They are objects to be looked at, upon which much care has been lavished, and at some point they cease simply to be the medium for lyric expression and become as materially based as any other copper image” (1995: 142). Although artwork plays an important part in Gira’s activity,¹⁰ it is the correlation between Swans’ music and his lyrics that becomes the motor of his arts. Consequently, to participate in Gira’s mystery is to rigidly follow his requirements concerning the act of listening, which is also a significant part of experiencing Blake’s poems. In “Introduction” opening *Songs of Innocence*, a child urges the poet:

“Drop thy pipe, thy happy pipe;
Sing thy songs of happy cheer:!”
So I sang the same again,
While he wept with joy to hear. (Blake 1977: 104)

⁹ Emerson: “The eye is the best of artists” (1983: 14).

¹⁰ It is important to notice that each cover of the three albums centres on one distinctive and simple image that may be also interpreted in more symbolic terms. On *The Seer* cover there is an image of a wolf; on *To Be Kind* – the head of a screaming infant; on *The Glowing Man* – a more ambiguous mixture of an alphabetical sign with a human hand. Out of these three, probably the cover for *The Seer* seems most intriguing: “a snarling/grimacing wolf leering out from the shadows suggests both hunter and hunted. The perfect image of a metaphysical monster in the dark” (Wilson 2014).

Roland Barthes notes: "... to listen is to adopt an attitude of decoding what is obscure, blurred, to mute, in order to make available to consciousness the 'underside' of meaning (what is experienced, postulated, intentionalized as hidden)" (1991: 249). Listening, then, is instantly connected to seeing in this sense that it brings us closer to the truth. And again, for Gira it is another example of a communal experience; in "She Loves Us" he declares: "I am no thing, I am no one. Come to my mouth, come to my tongue" (Swans 2014). Similarly as for Blake, an individual for Gira does not matter: what is important is to lose oneself in the production of sounds illustrated here as a mayhem of creation. Sławek comments on Blake's celebration of individuality: "We see then that the world is treated as a system of utterances, and voice is viewed as a procedure through which a text emerges from its background; voice gives contours to an object, a phenomenon is drawn by voice" (1985: 17). In the case of Swans, it takes the form of a madrigal: a constellation of voices in which singularity is no longer required as it becomes a burden one needs to shake off to unite with the universe. "To Be Kind:" "To be lost, to be lost. To be found in the sound of this room" (Swans 2014).

Barthes makes the following distinction: "*Hearing* is a physiological phenomenon; *listening* is a psychological act" (1991: 245). However, for Gira these two activities constitute one entity: his strategy is based on "merging," of mixing all sorts of sensations into one unity. For him, hearing-listening is both physical and spiritual. In "To Be Kind" he states: "Listening, just listening to the rain, to the wind, to the field" (Swans 2014). Physicality of the experience dissolves in transcendence that comes as a result of it: one does not exist without the other. Blake states: "I have a great ambition to know everything" (qtd. in Ackroyd 1995: 62), and the hunger for full totality of human experience characterizes Gira's approach, too. This spectrum also includes transcendence that music is able to trigger. Barthes: "... what is plumbed by listening is intimacy, the heart's secret" (1991: 250). Definitely, it is not the easiest path for an artist to seek self-realization in the network of such constantly fluctuating experiences. Yet, as Paul Goodman notes referring to an imaginary artist, "[w]hen he creates, he wins; when he corrects his prejudices and habits he wins; when he resists and suffers, he wins" (2011 "Reflections:" 35). Once again this parallels both Swans' repetitive, rhythmical music and Barthes' consideration on the artistic nature of listening, i.e. listeners' active participation in this process: "By rhythm, too, listening ceases to be a purely supervisory activity and becomes creation. Without rhythm, no language is possible: the sign is based on an oscillation, that of the *marked* in the *non-marked*, which we call a paradigm" (1991: 249).¹¹ Music, in other words, just as poetry and language, becomes a medium for communication.

¹¹ The idea of a rhythm was also important for Blake, both as a poet and an engraver: "Blake's insistence upon tight rhymes and forms is a way of suggesting the limits of the medium he is employing, in exactly the same way as he emphasized the hatching and cross-hatching of his conventional commercial engravings. This gives his lyrics the power of direct statement, while allowing a dramatic withdrawal from the perceived sentiments of the poetic 'voice'" (Ackroyd 1995: 141).

5. POST-CHRISTIANITY

When Gira – through his music and poetry – endeavors to embrace the whole totality of existence, it also includes the religious sphere of life. Barthes notes: “To listen is the evangelical verb par excellence: listening to the divine word is what faith amounts to” (1991: 250). Vision meets here with the set of rules within which the artist operates, i.e. Christianity in this particular case. However, Gira’s attitude to religion is ambiguous. Sometimes, it can be deciphered as deeply devotional. In the diptych comprising “Cloud of Forgetting” and “Cloud of Unknowing” he refers directly to the already mentioned medieval meditative and theological text *The Cloud of Unknowing*, emphasizing the role of passivity in one’s faith. He states: “Surrender! Surrender! Take us! Take us! The sun, a son, a child, a son;” and concludes it with such a strong, Emersonian declaration: “I am not” (Swans 2016). Accepting some higher power over him, he abandons his own self in the act of communion with everything that surrounds him, which also includes the sense of divinity.¹² “A Piece of the Sky” begins in the following way: “Through a door in the air, on a crumbling stair, in a clear and rushing vein, in a tunnel full of rain, in a piece of yellow light, on the skin of my eye. Are you there?” (Swans 2012). The final question, a minimalistic chorus finishing every stanza of the song, seems to be directed to some kind of an absolute, whose presence the artist desires to feel. This direct inquiry is to possess the agential quality that stems from its instant simplicity. *The Cloud of Unknowing*: “If it be but a little word of one syllable, me think it better than of two: and more, too, according to the work of the spirit, since it so is that a ghostly worker in this work should evermore be in the highest and the sovereignest point of the spirit” (2014: 35). In other words, the power of a word together with the might of an insight are supposed to bring an individual closer to the absolute, which more or less fits the traditional understanding of faith. Sometimes, however, Gira’s concept of religion is disturbingly unorthodox or even blasphemous.

The basis of the controversies regarding Gira’s understanding of faith comes from the assumption that he distinguishes between spirituality and institutionalized religion. This duality, very typical for our times, is best explained by Paul Goodman as the concept of post-Christianity: “By ‘Post-Christian’ I mean the *falling apart of the complex of Christian notions*, so that they no longer balance, limit, and inspire one another. Some Christian attitudes have historically fulfilled themselves and have begun to seem anti-Christian. Others have begun to seem irrelevant. Nevertheless it is assumed, without inquiry, that the old global unity still exists. It is the tensions and the paradoxes of this situation, rather than any new idea or image that we experience as Post-Christian” (2011 “Post-Christian:” 300). Gira embraces all these complexities, and the best illustration of this approach is provided by the song “She Loves Us.” In the climactic section of the track Gira sings: “Fuck, fuck, fuck. Your name is fuck” over the background of male voices chanting “Halleluiah” in a monkish way (Swans 2014). It is possible to draw a parallel between this song and Margaret Atwood’s dystopian novel *Maddaddam*. The Canadian writer envisions here the post-apocalyptic world peopled by just few survivors

¹² Gira understands this act of surrender in close relation to the experience of music as “trying to find a contact with something bigger than yourself, which is where the music, at times and not always, involves. It’s like I say, when the music reaches this kind of stage where it’s an undeniable wave that’s moving forward, you just have to decide to just let it take you” (qtd. in Lennon 2016).

of the old civilization, and a completely new breed of homo sapiens, known as the Crakers, genetically modified to be innocent, kind and naïve. When the posthumans accidentally overhear one of the old human beings utter the word “fuck,” they instantly get interested in it enhancing it with a symbolic and religious meaning the word actually lacks. One of them shouts ecstatically as if in a prayer, addressing his words to a newly invented deity: “Fuck is in the sky!” (Atwood 2013: 147). The resemblance to Swans’ song is noticeable. Both Atwood and Gira emphasize the power that is hidden inside a word: “[o]bviously, the word ‘fuck’ is not sacred in itself – it is only through the way they use it that ‘fuck’ acquires religious significance. ... [The Crakers] subconsciously sense that words are powerful” (Kuźnicki 2017: 191). The whole scene from the book also includes a huge dose of irony directed at the way institutions and authorities operate. Such an attitude mirrors Blake’s – he begins “The Little Vagabond” from *Songs of Experience* with the line uttered by a small child: “Dear mother, dear mother, the Church is cold” (1977: 127). The British poet seems to be critical of the institution that appropriates spirituality. Gira perceives religion in a similar way: the external form does not really matter if it lacks the transcendent content. Although deeply spiritual, his attitude can also be labeled as anti-religious.

6. CHILDHOOD IS OVER

The duality of Gira’s apprehension of reality is another feature that situates his thought next to Blake’s.¹³ It is mainly detectable in both poets’ attitude to the innocence–experience dichotomy. In *Vala, or The Four Zoas* Blake asks: “What is the price of Experience do men buy it for a song / Or wisdom for a dance in the street?” (1977: 319). Probably the best known answers to these questions are given by the oppositional concept expounded in *The Songs of Innocence and Experience*, the two-part book of verse that presents two contrasting sides of our nature and existence: “The same elements are repeated or, rather, the same moment – that moment of human origin – is recreated and reinvented again and again in an endless plangent lament” (Ackroyd 1995: 180).¹⁴ Gira revisits this conception in a very unexpected and ambiguous way. First of all, we can get the impression that he alludes to the two most characteristic symbols from Blake’s *Songs*, the Tyger and the Lamb – in this exact order, which also carries significance. In “The Wolf” he sings: “Wash me in your bloodless light to be splayed upon your silver gate. I am proud in flesh, I am bruised but I am raised” (Swans 2012) emphasizing the combination of terror and fascination originally evoked by Blake’s famous poem. In “A Little God in My Hands” he alludes to the second symbolic animal stating: “Pink little lamb, on a granite slab, black chasm creeping, forever leaking. Oh universe: sing in reverse” (Swans 2014). However, as suggested above, Gira only uses Blake’s concept as the foundations for his own vision of the universe and our place in it.

¹³ Slawek on Blake: “Blake sees Eternity, but does it through a sign which, in order to melt away, has first to appear and make its presence felt. Blake’s eternity is a trace of a sign, its shadow and mirror image. Eternity is a sign double” (1985: 61).

¹⁴ Slawek summarizes the idea of Blake’s experience in the following way: “We can experience only what is given to us in its immediacy, i.e. on object which we face directly without a detour of the sign” (1985: 30).

The idea of “singing in reverse” may serve as a signpost to his strategy, since the American rock poet uses Blake’s concept of duality in a completely reciprocal way. In “Lunacy,” the song opening the whole epic trilogy, a very powerful declaration appears: “Innocence – not innocent. Innocent – in no sense. ... Your childhood is over (is over)” (Swans 2012). Gira’s diagnosis for the humanity is we are now at the stage of experience in this sense that we have lost the gift of a vision, characteristic of innocent children. This concept clearly parallels Blake’s similar idea embarked in the dual title of his *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. Emerson adds to it: “The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child” (1983: 10), to which Goodman proposes a complementary assessment: “Experience is torn by confusion, and the darkness seeps through” (2011 “Beyond:” 321). We live, Gira suggests, in the state of coil and exhaustion that we triggered ourselves. “People like Us:” “We’re drifting goodbye on a rust-colored cloud. Oh fallopian friends, abandon us now. Our systems are full of bones ground to dust. The sky shows a bruise where our fingers have touched” (Swans 2016). Consequently, Gira envisions a post-apocalyptic scenario in which – as he sings in the same song – “The ocean is shifting. We’re sailing amok. The methane is rising to heaven above” (Swans 2016). Or – to quote William Butler Yeats, this time without the question mark originally finishing the poem – “... rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born” (1992: 235).¹⁵ Similarly to the Irish poet, Gira sees the world as doomed and having no bright future that awaits humanity.¹⁶ Fighting is futile – our only option is to acknowledge this fate and start anew. “The Song for a Warrior:” “Use your sword, use your voice and destroy and destroy. Then begin again” (Swans 2012). Paradoxically, then, there is a prospect of hope in this instigation: a seed of light in the center of destruction, the idea of a possible new beginning.

7. TO BE KIND

What are foundations of the new beginning, then? In “People like Us” Gira starts from describing the contemporary human being’s condition: “We’re calling for more cause nothing is left. The words are all gone. There’s more to be said” (Swans 2016). The conclusion to which he comes is surprising in its simplicity and directness. “To Be Kind” offers the following declaration: “To be kind, to be kind. To be real, to be new” (Swans 2014), which becomes the cornerstone of his philosophy, at the same time paralleling Blake’s statement in *Jerusalem*: “... every Kindness to Another is a little Death / In the Divine Image nor can Man exist but by Brotherhood” (1977: 842). Gira proposes a project of the return if not to the innocence, then at least to universal kindness, no matter how utopian it may seem. The anonymous author of *The Could of Unknowing* states: “The substance of all perfection is nought else but a good will; and how that all sounds

¹⁵ One can sense Yeats’ symbolic beast approaching in “The Seer Returns” where Gira states: “I know I’ll never die. I scream up at the sky. You have arrived” (Swans 2012).

¹⁶ A description can be found in Gira’s short story “The Great Annihilator, or, Francis Bacon’s Mouth:” “Hidden by distance, the darkness behind the stars reached an impenetrable density. Light, thought, and possibility were sucked helplessly into the inhaling mouth of the dead hole. Inside the hole was the center of the heart of the opposite of space. The future and the past were nullified, backwards and forwards. History rewound, snubbed out before it began. Silence was exterminated” (1995: 103).

and comfort and sweetness that may befall in this life be to it but as it were accidents” (2014: 43). Similarly, Gira’s solution for us drifts towards Christian thought, and one of its pillars, which also stands in the center of Blake’s thought. In “The Divine Image” from *Songs of Innocence* we read:

For Mercy has a human heart
Pity, a human face;
And Love, the human form divine;
And Peace, the human dress. (1977: 111)

At the same time, however, Gira’s concept definitely outreaches traditionally understood religious thinking and enters the secular sphere of existence. In other words, what he achieves to construct is his own idea of all-embracing humanism, which is very close to Emerson’s philosophy when he states that “[t]he foundations of man are not in matter, but in spirit” (1983: 45). From the conservatively theological point of view such an assessment could be considered heretical and blasphemous.

In “Screen Shot” Gira shouts out: “Love! Now! Breathe! Now! Here! Now!” (Swans 2014).¹⁷ To kindness, the poet adds the concept of love as the healing – or at least enabling survival – power for our civilization. This idea corresponds with Goodman’s perception of this feeling and its significance: “Love is the experience that takes me beyond experience. Love has a concrete object and feeling, but it exists by promising to continue beyond Here Now and Next. As Rilke’s Unicorn ‘exists by the possibility of being,’ love exists by the possibility of becoming. Thus it is the only theological virtue that is not empty of content, and from which something follows in my behavior. And I think this is why it has a privileged position in orthodox theology: it incarnates the god. He who will come. ... Simply, the beloved fills the field of experience – ‘I am That’ – and because I am diminished, new energy wells up, undomesticated, indefinite in meaning” (2011 “Beyond:” 313–314). Love situates itself both within and outside theology: being a deeply human sensation, it becomes the basis for humanism.¹⁸ Blake’s “The Cloud and the Pebble” from *Songs of Experience* begins in the following way:

Love seeketh not itself to please,
Nor for itself hath any care,
But for another gives it ease,
And builds a heaven in hell’s despair. (1977: 118)¹⁹

¹⁷ Gira revisits this motif of revitalizing activity of breathing in “Mother Of The World” with a hypnotic repetition of the phrase “In and out and in and out again” (Swans 2012), as well as in “Oxygen,” where he openly links it with the spiritual sphere of life: “I’ll steal all the oxygen! Oxygen! Amen! Oxygen! Amen! Breathe in! Breathe in!” (Swans 2014). All these instances situate life-giving breathing as one of the central metaphors in his philosophical system.

¹⁸ The opening words of “Some Things We Do:” “We seed, we feel, we need, we fight, we seal, we cut, we seek, we love” (Swans 2014).

¹⁹ However, we need not forget that the poem finishes with a completely contrasting section: “Love seeketh only Self to please, / To bind another to its delight, / Joys in another’s loss of ease, / And builds a hell in heaven’s despite” (Blake 1977: 119).

Love brings comfort for a post-Christian man, but does not distance them from the hard reality. "Just A Little Boy (For Chester Burnett):" "Now I sleep in the belly of woman, and I sleep in the belly of man. And I sleep in the belly of rhythm, and I sleep in the belly of love, I sleep in the belly of oceans, I sleep in the belly of truth, I sleep in the belly of kindness. And I sleep in the belly of you" (Swans 2014). In other words, as John Lennon used to sing in a song that also made extensive use of verbal repetitions: "All you need is love, love. / Love is all you need" (The Beatles 1967).

8. IMAGINE (CONCLUSIONS)

Gira's new humanism is directly connected both to the spiritual idea of the absolute and one's capability of a vision. *The Cloud of Unknowing*: "Imagination is a power through which we portray all images of absent and present things, and both it and the thing that it worketh in be contained in the Memory" (2014: 54). The central image of Gira's vision is not any god, but a human being. "There are millions and millions of stars in your eyes," states the poet in "To Be Kind" (Swans 2014), paying homage to the divine element in us. The same idea can be sensed in "Song for a Warrior:" "Some people say God is long dead, but I heard something inside you with my head to your chest" (Swans 2012). We are the vessel for divinity, we are the beginning and the end, everything depends on us, and us only. The sacrum becomes the profanum and the sacrum at the same time. Goodman: "I do not know of any sacraments that take me beyond experience. Love takes us beyond experience, but we love by grace, and I am puzzled at those who urge me to love my neighbor ..." (2011 "Beyond:" 321). In "When Will I Return?" Gira asks this eponymous question, and it seems that listening to Swans' twenty-first-century century trilogy, we witness the return of the I/eye, the return of the subject. In the same song he answers the inquiry: "I'm alive" (Swans 2016), and the response stands for the victory of his mode of thinking.

In highly symbolic terms, the song that finishes the entire Swans' trilogy is entitled "Peace, Finally." It appears that Gira describes the full circle: from the end of innocence in the opening, already mentioned "Lunacy," through the disturbing images of our experience, through the visions evoked by open, unbiased seeing and hearing,²⁰ he returns to innocence, rediscovering its omniscience and comfort. In this transcending entity that comprises sound, vision, love, kindness and divine humanism, the poet rediscovers his own identity, uniting with the surrounding universe. Finally, he finds peace: "Now the city's dissolving and heaven's inhaling while the ocean is thinking of a surface reflecting your glorious mind, your glorious mind, your glorious mind" (Swans 2016).

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²⁰ Barthes: "freedom of listening is as necessary of freedom of speech" (1991: 260).

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