

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31392/NPU-nc.series9.2024.27.03>

UDC: 821.161.2-1.09:27-5+299.5

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REMINISCENCES OF PROFANUM AND SACRUM IN THE POETICS OF SERHII ZHADAN

Bibliographic Description:

Pavlov, V. (2024). Reminiscences of Profanum and Sacrum in the Poetics of Serhii Zhadan. *Scientific Journal of Mykhailo Dragomanov State University of Ukraine. Series 9. Current Trends in Language Development*, 27, 28–37. <https://doi.org/10.31392/NPU-nc.series9.2024.27.03>

Abstract

The article examines the transformation of sacred and profane motifs in Serhii Zhadan's creative work. In particular, a comparative analysis of early poems and modern poetry was carried out. The key sacred and profane images are revealed, which acquire a new meaning in the author's authentic reading. Philosophical and intimate lyrics resonate with the Bible and profane space as a canvas of being. Serhii Zhadan's early poems are full of hope and love and retain a fractal structure. The poet's modern poems illustrate the artist's maturity and poise. On the other hand, modern Zhadan becomes more straightforward and uncompromising. Sacrum and profanum are not always opposite, but always complementary concepts in Serhii Zhadan's work. Today, Serhii Zhadan addresses not only his contemporaries, but also the dead and the unborn, as Taras Shevchenko once did. The figure of Serhii Zhadan should be considered comprehensively through the prism of his activities. After all, volunteering and participation in a large number of public initiatives with the aim of enlightenment, the revival of the Ukrainian nation not only affects the artist's creativity, but also brings him to the forefront of the cultural and military front.

Keywords: *sacrum, profanum, fractals, images-symbols, space, time, prophet, early poetry, modern poems.*

1. Introduction.

Since ancient times, Ukrainian fiction has sought to find the hidden meanings of life. The chronicles of Kyivan Rus stated events and recorded worldviews, while “The Tale of a Regiment...” presents the techniques of imagery in a work of fiction that convey sacred reminiscences of symbols of good and bad signs and attempts to predict the future. The entire history of Ukraine is imbued with the spirit of fighting for what is right, defending dignity and freedom. Thus, in Ivan Kotliarevskyi's “Aeneid” we see deep sarcasm, spirituality, which is sacred against the background of the profane world of imperial power. Taras Shevchenko's poetry is imbued with deep sadness for his people, who have to adapt to the profane world while preserving sacred traditions in every family. Then Mykola Zerov and Maksym Rylsky address the sacred theme of Christmas as a spiritual pillar amidst the profane everyday life. And our contemporary Serhii Zhadan, in the realistic and avant-garde

manner of his poetic work, finds sacred meanings in the images of Mary, Jesus, women and men who live their everyday lives in a profane space, fight for freedom and dignity with their own profane demons that come from the environment and settle in the heart, instilling doubt and fear.

2. Literature Review.

Ukrainian philosophical lyrics are a system of the poetic worldview of the people. It is reflective lyrics that best reflect traditional ideas about the Ukrainian people and their beliefs through a system of archetypal images, recurring themes, and leading motifs. It is worth noting that here, first of all, we are talking about a system of sacred values imprinted in the genetic memory of generations. The phenomenon of the sacred is always associated with something inviolable, and its evolution can best be traced through the system of eternal values. The study of this phenomenon is very relevant, as this category clearly demonstrates the spiritual aspect of humanity and the system of poetic beliefs of the people. The study of sacred themes and motifs requires scientific knowledge of various disciplines, including history, theology, psychology, ethnography, linguistics, literary studies and philosophy, etc.

The most comprehensive definition of this concept is given by I. Nabitovych: “the category of sacrum, or sacred, is one of the universals that includes correlations, interdependencies and relations, the most characteristic key terms and concepts of different religions, and, more generally, the concept of culture in general” (Nabytovych, 2008). An interesting attempt to reach an interdisciplinary level in the field of the above-mentioned problems is his concept of the fractal nature of chaos. Thus, the researcher uses a mathematical term to describe the nature of the category of chaos, as he sees many similarities with it in fractals. In particular, both categories are dynamic; at the same time, they are subjective and objective phenomena; both are structures; both are on the borderline of art and science. Thus, a “fractal dynamic model-matrix of the category of chaos” is formed “a virtual set of irrational concepts of sacred and religiously labelled concepts, which in structural unity create a special discursive picture of the category of chaos” (ibid., 2008).

It is worth noting that for a religious scholar, “sacred” has a broader meaning than holy, while traditionally the category of sacrum is defined in the context of religion, and even more narrowly for the Christian sphere: “The sacred is a term that describes the sacraments of the church, objects of religious worship, things belonging to worship, everything that, according to the teaching of the Church, is endowed with the grace of God” (Dictionary of Literary Studies, 2007, p. 579). A broader view of the meaning of the terms can be seen in the definition proposed by Yurii Kovaliv: “The sacred is an inviolable, sacred, innate religious model of worldview that is present in the texts of the Rigveda, the Holy Scriptures, and more. The concept also applies to works of art that acquire a deep spiritual meaning” (Kovaliv, 2013).

In other words, it is not only about religious concepts, but also about a certain awe, reverence, mystery, sanctification of virtue, in fact, about concepts that are central to the formation of the sacred axiological sphere, the sphere of eternal values and moral ideals. It is the combination of these concepts that clearly points to philosophical art, which not only has religious roots, but also has been closely interacting with the system of myths, symbols, and religious truths for thousands of years.

Yu. Kovaliv rightly notes that art has always had a lot in common with the category of the sacred (Kovaliv, 2013). This similarity concerns not only the authenticity of eternal questions, but also the metaphorical language of sacred texts and works of art. Analysing the specifics of the reception of the Holy Scriptures in Ukrainian literature, I. Betko emphasises the special philological value of the Bible: “its artistic language is characterised by narrative

forms, monologues and dialogues, lexically rich in synonymy, various repetitions, synthetics and antithetics, parallelisms, anaphora, allegory and many other artistic means of actualising the content” (Betko, 1995). To reveal the meaning of a symbol means articulation into a whole or even integration into a “system” (Bestiuk, 2007). A similar idea was expressed by the Canadian critic Northrop Frye; in particular, he saw the Bible as a meta-language, as a great code of art (*ibid.*, 2007).

The study of Ukrainian philosophical lyrics clearly reveals the theological principle underlying this type of poetry, as its most important elements were demonstrated during the period of growth and prosperity of Christianity. Furthermore, biblical motifs and images dominate the works of the founders of the Ukrainian philosophical and poetic tradition (H. Skovoroda, T. Shevchenko, I. Franko, Lesia Ukrainka, etc.). In Ukrainian literary studies, many works by V. Antofiychuk, I. Betko, T. Bovsunivska, Z. Lanovyk, I. Nabytyovych, A. Nyamtsu, V. Sulyma, and others are devoted to the study of the sacred image of God. I. Betko distinguishes three concentric circles of sacrum in Ukrainian literature: the problem of national self-determination of the Ukrainian nation, moral and personal issues, and the system of spiritual and philosophical knowledge of God. The research is devoted to the relevance of the concept of sacred history in the Bible (Zoryana Lanovyk) and the mythological and sacred analysis of the philosophy of ancient texts (Vira Sulyma). V. Antofiychuk analyses in detail the peculiarities of the functioning of biblical images and motifs in Ukrainian literature. According to him, Christianity is a powerful source from which national verbal creativity draws material, a treasure trove of ideas, images and motifs, as well as a standard of moral and psychological virtues.

Religious theories of the world assume the division of existence into the spheres of sacrum, where there is a place for supernatural beliefs and rituals, and profanum, where people live a secular everyday life. Interesting is R. Cayoua’s definition of homo religious as a person who functions in two spheres: one where he acts without fear, and the other where his actions and impulses are regulated by the internal conventions of this person. And here we can talk about the concept of the reverse sacrum, which represents the true being of each person. Being combines sacrum and profanum as interconnected elements of every person’s life.

Sacrum and profanum are in opposition, but we should not consider a one-sided interpretation of the opposition of these concepts, since the Latin *fanum*, *fani* means holiness and consecration of the locus, the procedure of consecrating a place for a shrine. Therefore, profanum is something that precedes sacredness, it is characterised by unsacralised everyday patterns. Profanum is formed from sacrum and is its continuation in the cycle of being (Nabytovych, 2008).

B. Wilson in his research “The Sociology of Religion as a Science” notes that “These two kinds of things cannot come close to each other and still retain their nature” (Wilson, 2002). That is why we should take into account, but not take as a basis, the opposition of the profane and the sacred when analysing lyrical works of Ukrainian literature. After all, the profane is the foundation and the environment, and the sacred is an inexhaustible source that supports and renews life.

Contemporary philosophical lyrics continue the millennial tradition of referring to biblical texts. It should be noted that in recent years, reflective poetry has been increasingly focusing on axiological issues, which is typical of the unstable moods of the transition period. In this context, Z. Lanovyk rightly notes: “In times of spiritual crisis of society, there is a special interest in studying the Holy Scriptures as a constant of humanitarian experience” (Lanovyk, 2009, pp. 99–106).

Marta Zambrzycka notes that contemporary Ukrainian literature presents methods of using the reverse sacrum. In particular, the researcher cites an example of the problem of the reverse sacrum in Valeriy Shevchuk's novel *Dark Music of the Pines*, where "the category of the reverse sacrum, namely holiness, is located in a space that traditionally belongs to the category of profanum and manifests itself in situations that are considered distorted, vulgar, unclean, or even sinful" (Zambzhytska, 2011, pp. 311–316). M. Zambzhytska emphasises that Shevchuk "expands the definition of sacrum and offers a new, original understanding of sin and holiness, of what is pure and impure" (ibid., pp. 311–316).

In the context of our study, we also see the use of the reversed sacrum in the lyrics of Serhii Zhadan, who depicts profane space and sacred time in it. It is the use of images of profane city symbols as a backdrop for the lyrical hero to find sacred meanings in himself and give himself time that forms the fractal structure of the poems, which reflects life in its complex manifestation of the interaction of profane and sacred components.

3. Aim and Objectives.

The **relevance of the research** is due to the study of early and contemporary poetic works by Serhii Zhadan through the prism of profanum and sacrum. After all, Serhii Zhadan began his literary activity at the time of the formation of Ukrainian statehood, during the transition period from the Soviet environment to the European vector, during the period of self-identification of the Ukrainian nation. Today, we see a different, mature Zhadan, who has continued his journey not only in writing, but also in public activities, in volunteering, which influences the vector of his work. In Serhii Zhadan's poems, new images emerge, he captures the cruel profane reality between the lines, and sacredness remains in the actions and decisions of small and large people. A comparative analysis of the early and contemporary works of Serhii Zhadan will allow us to trace the transformation of the consciousness of Ukrainians, which is reflected in the poetic work of the artist, who is sensitive to social and historical changes.

The object of the **study** is the poetry collections "Citation Book" (1995), "Pepsi" (1998), "List of Ships" (2018–2019), "Skrypnykivka" (2023).

The **purpose of the study** is to make a comparative analysis of the artistic techniques of depicting profane space, sacred time, and images in the poems of the early and contemporary periods of Serhii Zhadan's work.

4. Methodology.

The **methodological guideline** is based on the study "The Paradox of the Reversed Sacrum..." by Marta Zambrzycka, the concept of sacrum as an ambivalent, dual category characterised by sinful and pure manifestations at the same time by Rudolf Otto and Roger Cailloux, as well as the study of sacrum by Ihor Nabytovych.

5. Results.

In S. Zhadan's lyrics, we see everyone: children, men, women, boys and girls, saints and dishonourable. And each lyrical character is endowed with the author's full acceptance. It is as if Serhii Zhadan sympathises and understands each of them, knows their past and future, analyses and emphasises their character traits, depicts their wrinkles, catches the subtle waves of the hero's mood here and now. The space in which Serhii Zhadan's lyrical protagonist lives is fragmented and mosaic-like; in search of a new formulation of the really necessary ideas, the author uses biblical images of the righteous to reveal the sacredness of the Ukrainian as such, to express his identity and authenticity.

It is worth considering the leading accents of the collections of poems by Serhii Zhadan analysed in this study in order to trace the change in tone and reminiscence of the sacred and profane in the poet's poems.

The collection "Cytatnyk" was published in 1995, with a foreword written by Andriy Kokotiukha, who noted that "poems are born on noisy streets, dirty station squares, in trains, they are saturated with smoke from factory chimneys, poisonous car emissions, and the smell of asphalt hot in the sun. Serhii Viktorovych belongs to the youngest generation of writers who are tired of the embellished, exaggerated, perfumed reality and reflect reality as it really is" (Zhadan, 2009).

A. Bila calls Zhadan's early poetry "ruthless and scalping towards the deformed society" (Bila, 2002). The collection "Citation Book" is characterised by parables, collages, mosaicism in combining incompatible concepts of the sacred and profane, burlesque and travesty. This collection traces the profane space and sacred meanings.

The Pepsi collection of 1998 became a kind of awareness of the meaning of being and a hope for "the possibility of self-sacrifice in an indifferent world" (Pepsi, 1998) This collection reflects the search for justice, the heroics of revolution and war against the backdrop of a transitional period that is just beginning to gain momentum in the social context. Here we can see images of fish, snow, and the city – the leading sacred images-symbols in the writer's work. The profane space in the collection is associated with the outdated narratives of the Soviet Union, and sacred reminiscences can be traced in the hope for the best, in the struggle, in the actions and choices of specific people who are not identified with society but are its driving force towards sacredness and authenticity.

"The List of Ships" (2018–2019) is a list of those who have passed away, but who cannot be forgotten. A list of names that accompany you throughout your life. A list of cities where you are always welcome. Perhaps the author's most intimate and painful book" (Zhadan, 2020) – the annotation to the publication reads. It is worth mentioning here that at the time of writing the collection, military operations had been taking place in eastern Ukraine for several years, and Serhii Zhadan had been and still is active in volunteer and public activities. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the collection contains an allusion to the events of antiquity, their depiction through the prism of modernity, which prompts an analysis of the consequences of the present, taking into account the past.

M. Sulyma emphasizes a significant "progress in the poet's poetic skill and the creation of images of the poet" (Sulyma, 2017). This testifies to the maturity of Serhii Zhadan as an author and contemporary philosopher. After all, the years 2018–2019 were a kind of lull for the Ukrainian society, which was still asleep. And Zhadan, as an artist sensitive to the slightest social changes, called for waking up and identifying himself on a sacred level. However, society chose profanum to face the inevitable great war that would eventually trigger the nation's awakening.

The collection Skrypnykivka, which the author began writing in 2021 and published in 2023, has hardly been studied. Therefore, it is worth relying on the author's own opinion, who can say for sure what concepts he was putting into it: "Many things now need to be renamed, re-examined, re-voiced. And in this case, Skrypnykivka is a collection about language, about its possibilities, its vulnerability and its helplessness, and on the other hand, about its power and energy, which becomes so powerful that it allows us to overcome our silence, our numbness".

6. Discussion.

Early Zhadan is a syncretism of deep spirituality and impulsiveness. If, for example, Ivan Malkovych, at all stages of his work, used a more traditional approach to the use of

biblical motifs, Serhii Zhadan's early lyrics are more impulsive. The poet does not write in "strokes" but puts "black blots" on white paper. The accents and comparisons in his poems are so incongruous at first glance that the reader has to think about the meanings the author wanted to convey. And when the awareness of the sacred motifs comes, the deep philosophy of Zhadan's early poetry is revealed even through sharp comparisons.

The poem "General Judas" from the 1995 collection "Citation Book" presents the profanity of space and the sacredness of time and details in this time. The image of General Judah here acts as a frame for the poem, in whose reflections the whole sacred meaning of the transience of life and priorities unfolds. The image of the struggle for one's own sacred ideals in this poem echoes the value of the family and the continuation of the work of parents in the future of their children:

"Late in the evening, snow fell
Bandages of dirt on my chest.
The festering wounds in the bed are close
Sick Judah licks.
(...)
We carried the banners to the cemetery,
We cried hard and mercilessly.
And played in the nursery with empty shell casings
His little descendant".

The profane space in the poems of early Zhadan is intertwined with the futility of the daily rituals of a small person in sacred time. Hope and faith as religious motives, which are almost the only pillars in the life of a sinful person, become unimportant in the vast space. We can also see the image of the righteous man in the collection "Citatnik" as a polar interpretation of the image of holiness. The lyrical hero of Serhii Zhadan is a righteous man in a special interpretation and philosophical understanding. For Zhadan, righteousness is loyalty to sacred ideals, not religion:

"Everything, as always, has a justification.
All roads are travelled and unnecessary,
All the difficult mornings of waking up
At empty and dirty railway stations,
All the butterflies of hope that stubbornly
Beat in the lamp of the ancient moon,
Even we, who have worn out our feet
On the way to our justification".

In the 1998 collection Pepsi, Serhii Zhadan develops a system of images, the motif of love and symbolism is clearly manifested in the details. It is worth noting that the poem "Plastunka N" literally describes the image of sacred time: "woven into time's stitching of trophies". This metaphor reveals the image of time as a value, something that is forever significant for individuals but changeable for space:

"This is how your childhood receded –
a voice was lost, friends were lost,
"high in the sky, firmly and briefly
life hung like an earring in your ear.

This is how we lived – loud and clumsy,
woven into time like a trophy ribbon,
prodigal champions of boogie-woogie,
the stoned children of strong port”.

Love is also depicted here as a sacred concept, because it is “rewarded”. In his early poetry, Serhii Zhadan relies on love, and love is almost his main muse. An interesting aspect is that Zhadan’s love is always full of hope and faith, acceptance and drama. Love is redemption and a saviour:

“A morpheme of feeling sticks to the lips.
This alternative transparent water.
You can’t categorise what happened.
This is how we loved. And we are being rewarded”.

The creative path of Serhii Zhadan is a historical and cultural process in a deep philosophical and realistic understanding. After all, if the early Zhadan is about the diversity of images, a wide mosaic of feelings, then the modern Zhadan is about comprehending life in broad strokes of everyday life.

The collection “List of Ships” of 2018–2019 illustrates the maturity and affirmation of the poet in his views. The poem of the same name is full of biblical images, sacred and religious motifs against the background of profane space. The sacredness is expressed in the iconic details of profane everyday life. The metaphors become deeper, the fractal structure of the poems emerges into a coherent picture of deeper meanings:

“The kingdom of heaven,” they say about life.
About everyday life, about time,
which they are allowed to spend on love.
The kingdom of heaven is what they call
their original world, their childhood sadness,
that restrains the speech of the brave”.

Serhii Zhadan reflects on the truths of existence and comes to the conclusion that life is fleeting and it is worth resisting and holding on to important simple things that are actually sacred, “to conquer fear” is the most important mission, because “the kingdom of heaven is trampled by women’s shoes in blue snowdrifts” – here the poet uses the image of the kingdom of heaven as a profane space, and the image of a woman as something that fills the profane with the sacred. And this is where Serhii Zhadan’s skill of combining the opposite and highlighting the true sacred, but long-forgotten, really important things in life, is manifested and developed:

“The main thing in life is
to overcome the fear of winter, to see
logic in the fall of snow, to catch the rhythm of the great
darkness, which will certainly end in a thaw.
The sound of the high sky over the lowlands
the kingdom of heaven, trampled on
by women’s shoes in blue snowdrifts,
the kingdom of heaven in textbooks,

brought home from school by carolers,
like bread from the bakery”.

The collection, which was published during the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, is entitled *Skrypnykivka, 2023*. The poet chose the title of the collection as a symbol of hope for change and the actual implementation of these changes. It is worth noting that since 24 February 2024, Serhii Zhadan’s work has been on hiatus for 4 months. Nevertheless, the poet found the strength to resume his creative work even when “there is nothing to say. The poems in the collection *Skrypnykivka* became a manifesto for breaking the silence. Zhadan has never been silent about important things, but in 2023 he published not just philosophical lyrics, but an appeal to the beginnings of his work, as if rethinking his life and his country. The well-known poem “Some are better at consonants, some at vowels” illustrates the author’s special approach to conveying the sacred motif of language as a code of the nation. It is also worth mentioning here his quote “Language dies if it is not used to speak of love”. And now we can see the syncretism of creative motifs and cross-cutting images in the poems from the collection “*Skrypnykivka*”:

“From all literature
and all the possibilities of language
I have always been personally interested in words,
which are used to address
to the dead.
As if you can actually form a sentence,
that can penetrate the radio airwaves of death”.

The image of death is found in contemporary poetry more often than before. It is noteworthy that for Zhadan, holiness is profane, while death is sacred. Obviously, such changes were influenced by the historical events of the hybrid war of 2014 in eastern Ukraine and the great war of 2022. After all, Serhii Zhadan has an active civic position and is engaged in volunteer work. Many of his friends have already been killed in the war. Therefore, the poet addresses the dead through language – the code of the nation – a sacred image:

“Listen to me,
you who have been deprived of the sweet receptors of singing.
Listen to me now,
hear my whisper,
distorted by the acoustics of nothingness.
Listen to me,
you who have been marked by dialects like scars,
you who have had the hot needle of the alphabet in your throat since childhood,
you are the choristers who knew how to reproduce a bird’s cry”.

The *Skrypnykivka* collection is a modern interpretation of Taras Shevchenko’s testament: “To the dead, the living, and the unborn...”. Serhii Zhadan addresses Ukrainians in the period of the nation’s revival. Ahead of his time, like all the “prophets” of Ukrainian literature, not everyone hears Zhadan. Nevertheless, the sacred motifs: language, faith, freedom, which the poet describes in his poems through comparisons, dialogues, metaphors,

and illogical epithets, are Ukrainian values. Hope, as an image, does not leave Zhadan even in times of great war and is a reminder to every Ukrainian of his identity:

“But even after death, language is important.
It is like a deepening riverbed,
like the first autumn warming
of a big house”.

Serhii Zhadan no longer just paints a poetic picture with strokes, but calls, addresses, and engages in dialogue:

“You are now made up of echoes,
you are now filled with silence,
speak, come on, speak,
speak with the grass,
speak with the frost,
speak as conductors”.

Serhii Zhadan’s work responds to the challenges of the time, imbued with authenticity and sacredness, disdain for “small lords” and appeal to Ukrainian sacred values.

7. Conclusions.

Serhii Zhadan is a modern prophet, a coryphaeus of the Ukrainian national revival, sensitive to social and historical changes. The cross-cutting sacred motifs of language, faith, and freedom are realized in the images of a woman, a general, and death. The early Zhadan is full of love and protest, while the contemporary Zhadan rethinks life and tests the possibilities of the Ukrainian language, finding salvation and hope in it.

Serhii Zhadan’s early poetic work gravitates towards the search for the truth of existence. The poet turns to the colourful mosaic of images with which he saturates his works. The leading sacred motifs of Zhadan’s early work are a woman, who later transforms into the formed image of Mary, a righteous man who is still searching for his sacred purpose, and Christmas, as a through-and-through motif of the sacred essence of the Ukrainian nation.

Serhii Zhadan’s modern poetic work vividly reflects the turbulent historical process, military actions. The poet is no longer looking for the truth. He knows the truth, which he expresses in the fractal structure of his works through the images of the exile and the wanderer as sacred, and the profane space that merges with the grey mass of profane uninitiated people.

The profane space becomes hostile over time, while the sacred time at the distance of more than 20 years of the poet’s creative activity does not lose its significance. It is worth noting that Zhadan’s contemporary poetry is a concentrated and deeply philosophical mature palette of his poetic search.

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Анотація

У статті розглядається трансформація сакральних і профанних мотивів у творчості Сергія Жадана. Зокрема, проведено порівняльний аналіз ранніх віршів і сучасної поезії. Розкриваються ключові сакральні та профанні образи, які в автентичному авторському прочитанні набувають нового змісту. Філософська та інтимна лірика перегукується з Біблією та профанним простором як полотном буття. Ранні вірші Сергія Жадана, сповнені надії та любові, зберігають фрактальну структуру. Сучасні вірші поета свідчать про зрілість і виваженість митця. З іншого боку, сучасний Жадан стає більш прямолінійним і безкомпромісним. Сакрум і профанум у творчості Сергія Жадана – не завжди протилежні, але завжди взаємодоповнювальні поняття. Сьогодні Сергій Жадан звертається не лише до сучасників, а й до мертвих і ненароджених, як колись Тарас Шевченко. Постать Сергія Жадана варто розглядати комплексно через призму його діяльності. Адже волонтерство та участь у великій кількості громадських ініціатив з метою просвіти, відродження української нації не лише впливає на творчість митця, а й виводить його на передову культурного та військового фронту.

Ключові слова: сакрум, профанум, фрактали, образи-символи, простір, час, пророк, рання поезія, сучасні вірші.