

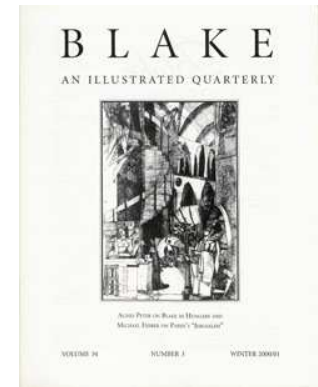
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A R T I C L E

The Reception of Blake in Hungary

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The Reception of Blake in Hungary

BY AGNES PETER

Blake started to exercise some modest influence in Hungary at the beginning of the twentieth century when two artists, Aladár Körösfői-Kriesch and Sándor Nagy, after a period of study in Rome, where, through the influence of a Hungarian Nazarene, they came into contact with the aesthetic principles of the Pre-Raphaelites and Ruskin as well as the socialist prophecies of William Morris, settled at Gödöllő, 20 kilometers northeast of Budapest in 1901, and established a colony of artists and artisans which became the nucleus of a short-lived movement, "the Gödöllő School." It was here at Gödöllő where Blake's name was first mentioned with a great deal of reverence (Szenczi 1969, 345).

In February 1917, *Múlt és Jövő* [*Past and Future*], a "Jewish literary, cultural, social and literary monthly," dedicated a special issue to works of art reflecting the fascination the ancient Hebrew traditions have exercised on the minds of artists. Among the pictures reproduced, 15 of Blake's Job plates appeared with a brief commentary in which Blake is defined as "a poet, a painter and a mystic" on whose mind darkness is said to have descended and he had "to say farewell to his wonderful visions and art painfully too early"; the apparently naive manner of representation, the critic, "Secundus" claims, corresponds to the archaic tone of the biblical text in a most perfect way, while the depth of conception and the mysticism of execution are said to disclose the impenetrable depths of Job's story (Secundus, 63). In 1924, seven of the same set of plates were used in *The Bible in Pictures*, a book compiled by the editor of the same journal, József Patai.

To commemorate the centenary of Blake's death, one of the most brilliant contributors to the forum of Hungarian modernism, the literary journal *Nyugat* [*West*], which had been established in 1908, and which, in strong opposition to the conventional nationalism of the establishment of contemporary Hungary, sought to invigorate Hungarian culture by an increased receptiveness to Western stimuli, Antal Szerb, author and critic, wrote a substantial, 25-page essay on Blake which eventually came out in 1928 with a bibliography of editions, biographies, and critical studies. Szerb draws upon all the then-available biographical and critical sources, English (Gilchrist, Tatham, Swinburne, Garnett, Arthur Symonds, Ellis and Yeats, Chesterton), German-Austrian (Helene Richter, Rudolf Kassner) and French (P. Berger). In his assessment of Blake's work as poet and artist he already employs some of the hypotheses of Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis.



1 This Is the Lot of All Prophets (Dózsa)

Blake's mysticism and his gospel of the liberation of the unconscious, mainly that of the "archetypal Eros," appeal to Szerb as the most distinctive features of his mythology. Most of Szerb's conclusions strike the critic today as amazingly well informed and profound.

Thanks to what he calls the double vision, the painter-mystic gives life to every thing, and fills everything with God's presence. He can do this with a realism that is incomparably greater than the German Romantics' philosophical pantheism or the almost obligatory pantheistic nature worship of the English poets in the line of Wordsworth, Shelley and Swinburne. The latter, despite the intensity of their enthusiasm, always remain outside the Great Unity, since their relationship with it is based on nostalgia, and nostalgia is always directed towards something that is outside us. Blake, on the other hand, thanks to his unique way of seeing, participates in every thing without any nostalgia or pathos, and his relationship with the All stems not from nostalgia: it is a human participation in the human All. (Szerb 249)

Although Blake is defined by Szerb as "the most eccentric of the eccentric poets of an eccentric nation," he is analyzed

in the context of European pre-romanticism as it was defined by Paul Van Tieghem in his comparative studies, *Le Prérromantisme: Études d'histoire littéraire Européenne*. Synthesizing the stimuli that he found in Ossian, Chatterton, Percy and the Gothic revival, on the one hand, and the national traditions of England (Renaissance and Milton), prompted by the Daughters of Inspiration, Blake is said to have been able to find a way to an interpretation of the universe which anticipates, Szerb claims, Hegel and the German Romantics, especially Novalis and Hölderlin:

In Blake inspiration means much more than art, much more than a means to create the work of art. Similarly to Novalis and his circle who attributed to the inspired, ecstatic fantasy a power which was creative not only artistically but also in terms of the phenomenal world (magic idealism), Blake ascribed a metaphysical function to inspiration: if truly inspired, man can defeat the spectre hiding in him which is his sense of guilt as well as the abstract, speculative intellect. Inspiration is redemption. (Szerb 258)

Szerb emphasizes the ethical implications of Blake's mysticism: through the salvation offered by inspiration man will be able to free himself from the shackles of the Law:

It is this implication of Blake's mysticism which is fully absorbed in the spirit of the newly emerging 19th century; it is this implication of his mysticism which, like German Romanticism, rolls into the greatest intellectual stream of the new century, the stream of Liberty. The waves of that stream are fed both by mysticism and rationalism; it is around this time that the injury inflicted on the human spirit by the ancient shackles, which have appeared to be eternal, start to be felt most acutely, and Blake is probably among those who articulate that pain the most poignantly. (Szerb 250)

Although none of Blake's writings had been translated into Hungarian previously, Szerb quotes some of the Songs, the manuscript poems, substantial passages from the prophecies, and even from the annotations to Reynolds and *A Descriptive Catalogue*.

Embracing Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur*, the central poet of Hungarian modernism and one of the key figures of the critical movement launched by *Nyugat*, Mihály Babits published a history of European literature in 1934-35 (*Az európai irodalom története*). Nobody has ever done quite so much for introducing nineteenth-century and contemporary English literature to the general public in Hungary as Babits. His enthusiasm for English poetry went as far as his defining England as the very nation of poetry. In Babits's survey of European poetry, Blake, although discussed very briefly, is securely there in the continuum of European poetic traditions; his presence is illustrated not only by his poems: two of his plates are also introduced, plate 5 of *The Book of Thel* and plate 11 of *America*.



2 Blake Dines with Prophets

The most important dates in the tradition of Anglo-Hungarian literary contacts indicate quite clearly that in this country there has always been a very strong ideological-political motivation behind the academic interest in English poetry. Antal Szerb's own survey of world literature (*A világirodalom története*), published in 1941, was composed under the pressure of the increasing threat of Nazi ideology whose influence, by that time, had become far too obvious in Hungary as well. "In defiance of the nightmare of a German Europe, European culture for Szerb meant Paris, London, Goethe's Weimar, and Florence," as György Poszler maintains in his monograph on Szerb (Poszler 389). The Blake who is portrayed here is probably not as warmly celebrated as Blake the mystic of the 1928 essay: it is obvious that some doubts are now entertained by Szerb about the implications of the liberation of the irrational and the instinctive. The prophetic books are said to be mainly inaccessible.

After all the horrors of World War II, to offer a cleansing experience which might prepare his own generation for a new start, Béla Hamvas, author and thinker, compiled his *Anthologia Humana* subtitled "The Wisdom of Five Thousand Years" (1947). In the introduction he quotes Hölderlin, "Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst das Rettende auch," and the anthology itself, a sequence of quotations said to represent the perennial wisdom surfacing again and again in the writ-

ings of the great seekers for truth from Hermes Trismegistos to Theodor Haeckert, is offered for meditation that might hopefully lead to moral purification as a form of "das Rettende." (It is ironic but characteristic of the "innocence" of Hamvas that some quotations from Lenin and Stalin are also included.) It is in this anthology that Blake's Proverbs of Hell were first published in Hungarian.

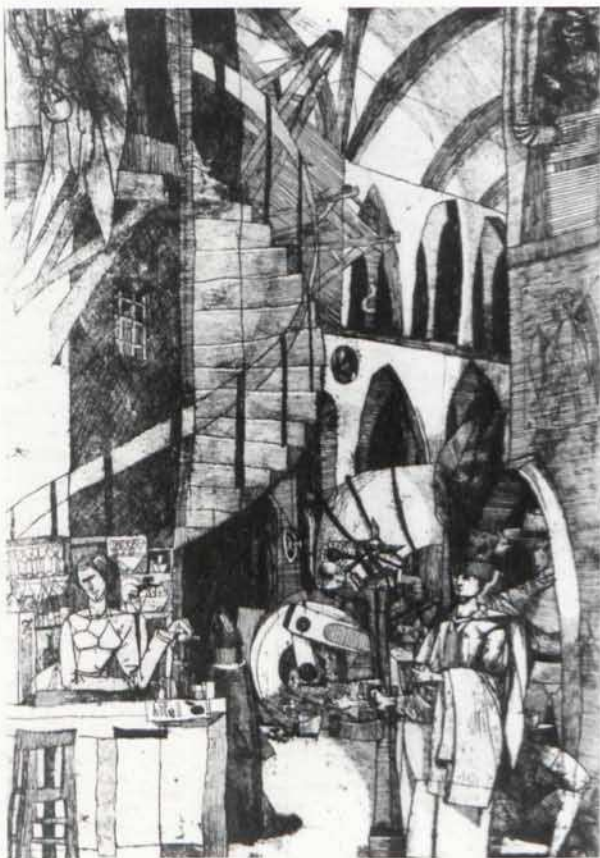
There came a considerable period of silence in the history of Blake's critical reception which can be attributed to the hegemony of a new concept of art as imitating social reality and having a strong political commitment. It was only some time after the failure of the uprising of 1956 when a compromise was achieved between the cultural establishment and the intellectuals seeking to find an acceptable status quo without moral qualms, that a new forum was established for the publication of foreign literature, the journal *Nagyvilág* [All the World Around]; this was supposed to bridge the gap between Hungarian literature and whatever innovative, experimental, non-canonical new writing emerged outside the country, including this time all the continents, East and West, both nations "great" and "small," in contradistinction to *Nyugat* at the beginning of the century with its exclusive interest in Western Europe. It was *Nagyvilág* which carried an essay commemorating the bicentenary of Blake's death in 1957, and this event seemed to be a prelude to the publication of a very fine selection of Blake's work in Hungary in 1959: *William Blake: Verse és Prófécia* [William Blake: Poems and Prophecies] edited and prefaced by Miklós Szenczi, Professor of English at the time (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest). This contained not only Blake's songs, most of the manuscript poems and the poems in his letters to Butts, but the complete *Book of Thel*, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, *America*, *Europe*, *The Book of Urizen*, *The Song of Los*, *The Ghost of Abel*, and substantial passages of *Vala*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*. The translators of the volume included some of the most virtuosic poets of the 1950s, including Sándor Weöres, whose own poems were later translated into English by Edwin Morgan. In his short Introduction to the Penguin edition of Weöres's *Selected Poems*, Edwin Morgan seems to claim that there is some affinity between Blake's own and Weöres's treatment of "the minute particulars" (Morgan 12). The volume has an appendix of graphics: four of the "Illustrations of Job" followed by "The Temptation of Eve," "Satan Triumphs over Eve," "Holy Thursday" (*Songs of Experience*), two plates of *Milton*, one of *Jerusalem*, "The House of Death," and "The Human Abstract." The cover carries "The Ancient of Days." I was at grammar school when the volume came out and still remember the thrill we felt at being able to hold the beautiful book in our hands. In Szenczi's very discerning biographical sketch and critical evaluation, Blake's commitment to the most radical ideologies of his time is brought into focus, as was expected by the norms of Marxist criticism, elevated by now to the status of the only reliable or objective approach to art. Interestingly enough, Szenczi's Blake with his well documented interests in the historical and social reality of his time anticipates the Blake of the New Historicists.



3 Printing House in Hell

The real breakthrough, however, in the history of Blake's reception in Hungary came when his name was first mentioned as one of the great artists whom Béla Kondor considered to be one of his masters. During his life time Béla Kondor (1931-72), an artist and poet, whose visionary representation of the world has "Dantesque dimensions" (Györi 267), was generally seen as a legendary figure, and very soon after his tragically early death in 1972 both his life and work assumed the status of a myth. As an artist he produced graphics, pastels, and oils which attracted huge crowds of people at each of his public shows; as a poet he was known only to a small circle of devotees and up to the present his stature as a poet has not been adequately assessed.

After the first public show of his early paintings, engravings, monotypes, and graphics in Budapest in 1960, and the show of 16 of his engravings in the Museum of Modern Art, Miami, US, in 1962, he was considered as an artist who had a leading role in the artistic revival of the early sixties, following the new Party directives on culture in 1958 which allowed, however grudgingly, a greater scope for free experimentation. By most of the intellectuals of the time, Kondor's work was seen as an expression of the tragic aspect of twentieth-century Hungarian history, and his exhibitions often had the air of a political demonstration. Up to the end of his tragically short life the cultural establishment tried to obstruct the growth of his fame and influence: characteristically enough his first exhibition was dismantled a few days after it was opened because the authorities panicked at the sight of the number of people who flocked to see his works. Official recognition came only after the 1989 transition: in 1990, 18 years after his death, by the painfully belated gesture of the Németh government, he was awarded the Kossuth prize, the greatest distinction in this country honoring artistic achievement.



4 Pub in Hell

Kondor, however, did not entertain any aspiration to the role of leader or political martyr. In his analysis of modern history Auschwitz was the most crucial disclosure of the horrific potentiality of man, and consequently it is Auschwitz that defines the tragic metaphysical world in which his art as a whole moves. Deliberately amalgamating various traditions, he produced an idiosyncratic, unique, and elusive mythological "system" with very strong metaphysical connotations which cannot be confined to any direct political allusions but are to be read, instead, as episodes in an incessant search for the most adequate and most trenchant way of defining man's tragic, irredeemable ontological status as well as a search for intellectual and emotional support that might protect the artist himself against succumbing to the temptation of nihilism.

His autonomy and independence from the then-prevalent trends in Hungarian art predestined him to isolation. This isolation, however, seems to be not only the outcome of his temperament but a deliberately chosen artistic stance. In a letter of 1968, which was published only after Kondor's death, he writes to one of the most influential art critics, Gyula Rózsa:

I would never venture to posit . . . such overweening and fanciful parallels between psychology, daily poli-

tics and art as you have done in several essays of yours. . . . Artists (including myself) are not born to solve social and political problems. . . . Between expression, solution and reality there are enormous chasms. Their interaction is far too psychological, which means that the territory itself is a mire. . . . I would like my works to be taken as I take television, radio, newspapers, etc. That is, as natural phenomena. I enjoy them because they are there and as soon as I don't want them I neglect them or turn them off. Art criticism is very far removed from art itself. Or should I say I frankly don't give a fuck about all your scribbling. That could be said only by an existentialist instead of me. (Rózsa 87)

As early as 1960, after the first public show of his graphic works, he was generally hailed as one of the most promising artists of the time, and although there were some voices deploring the form and execution of his work, he was compared by the more discerning critics to the greatest masters in the history of graphic art, to Bosch, Dürer and Cranach. As a poet, however, he still seems to be an embarrassment. He himself was rather reluctant to publish: his first volume came out in 1971, a year before he died. A lot of his writings still remain unpublished. In an essay of 1988, one of the most perceptive literary critics, Mátyás Domokos, claims that Kondor's poetry cannot be assessed unless we are ready "to get rid of the neurosis of literary criticism" which thinks compulsively in terms of classification, periodization, and well-defined categories (Domokos 327). He cannot be seen as belonging to any well-defined traditions in Hungarian poetry; the kind of transcendence and mysticism characteristic of Kondor's vision, as Ágnes Nemes Nagy, the poet and critic pointed out, has never been as integral to the Hungarian poetic tradition as to other poetries in Europe (quoted by Németh 1980, 21). It is obvious, however, that his stature as a poet cannot be defined until it is fully realized that in his case "poet and artist are one" (László Nagy, quoted by Györi 271), that his art and poetry are essentially and organically unified, and that his mythopoeic imagination worked along the same lines through the same recurring motifs in both his visual and verbal statements.

Kondor's attitude to tradition was unusual. In order to preserve his independence he had to dissociate himself from the then-fashionable art schools, the "Hungarian Barbizon" ("Nagybánya school") and post-impressionism, both having exhausted their resources by the time Kondor started his career. Talking about his initial problems, he said that "the air around me was blazing with the glossy chromic oxide and ultramarine slogans of Nagybánya and a host of provincial post-impressionist principles" (quoted by Németh 1980, 3).

During his years as an art student, because of his conflicts with the arbiters of the aesthetic norms of the time, in search of independence, he dropped painting and joined the Graphic Department. In order to find his own means of expression, he studied the graphic collection of the Museum



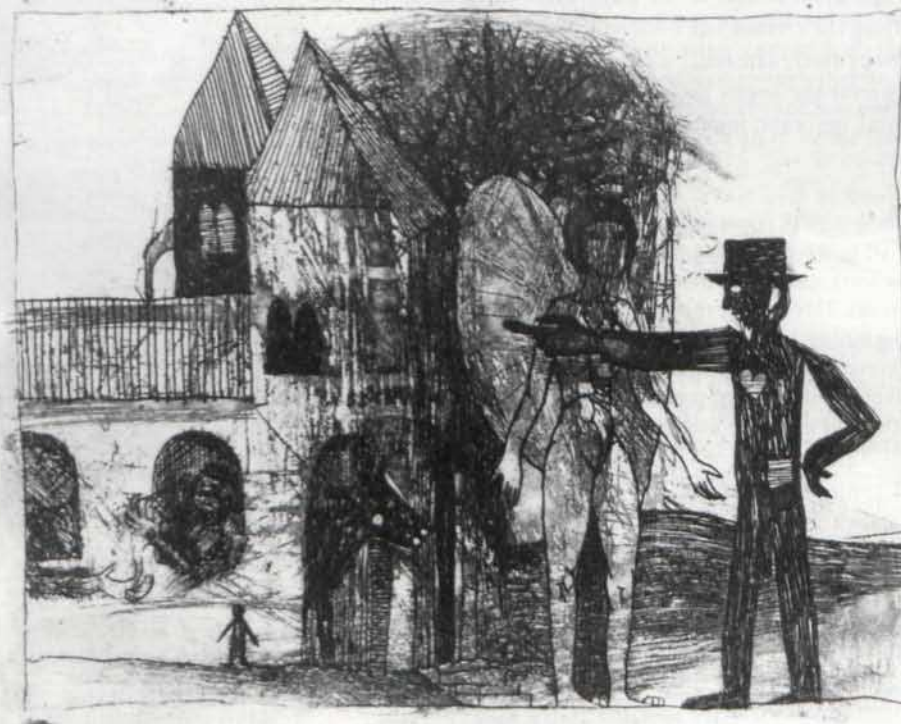
5 Expect Poison from
Standing Water

of Fine Arts (in his own account of the experience he mentions Bosch and Dürer but there were six volumes in the possession of the Museum at the time which were concerned with Blake's art and reproduced a substantial number of images) and produced a medium based on an eclectic use of various Medieval, Byzantine, and Renaissance emblematic traditions. Among the most important influences to be detected in Kondor's etchings, Blake was mentioned by the art critics soon enough. Kondor's diploma work, executed in 1956, already shows the intellectual complexity and profundity as well as the technical brilliance of his later work, that is, the independence and autonomy of vision and execution. It was a sequence of 16 copper plates about the most famous peasant revolt in Hungarian history (1514), with Dózsa the leader as protagonist.

The most conspicuous characteristic of the rendering of the story in graphic terms is that there is hardly any reference in the presentation of the scenes to the particular historical events; they are read rather as signs or revelations of a more universal meaning. In the penultimate plate (illus. 1), dedicated to the subject of retribution after the defeat of the uprising, Kondor uses a number of biblical allusions,

iconographic details which are supposed to evoke associations with the crucifixion: the crucified position of Dózsa's arms, a figure on the left holding the spear and the sponge at the end of a reed in his hand. Dózsa has already been offered vinegar and his side has been pierced. At his foot in the left hand corner there is a male figure with a hand stretched upwards, his palm eagerly opened to collect the blood. On the other side of the picture there is a ladder, a pervasive motif in Kondor's work, on top of which a figure is thrusting his fingers into the wound opened by the spear to make sure that it is the Savior. The simultaneity of representation gives narrative dimensions to the representation: sacrifice and resurrection are iconographically synthesized.

On the other hand, there are a number of motifs that call this simple reading into question in a most radical way. First of all, among the items of clothing hanging on Dózsa's left arm, the only item that can be clearly deciphered is a jester's cap, an attribute of the hero: is he a martyr or is he a fool? In his poem "Journey, House" ["Utazás, ház"] (both "journey" and "house" seem to be emblematic of man's fallen condition) Kondor says,



My Lord and Father, Mother, and Protector!
I am ceaselessly amazed: we've been had!
What is this power that forces us to do tasks
Which just can't be done, no way?

We are puppets: there must be a stage manager somewhere, male or female, who compels us to carry out impossible tasks. Existence itself is a compulsion without the hope of success. By juxtaposing incongruous elements in his pictures and poems, he usually enhances the deliberate ambiguity of his statements. Sympathy and irony, the sublime and the grotesque intermingle in his works as in Blake's reflections upon human nature and the cosmic arrangement.

Kondor's skepticism is emphasized by the inscription on the circumference of the wheel which dominates the composition. Kondor used inscriptions again and again in his pictures in a way that is somewhat similar to Blake's attempt to combine text and graphic representation (at the end of his life Kondor meant to produce plates where the visual and the verbal components would complement each other): he counterpoints his visual system of codes with verbal elements to provoke conceptual-intellectual interpretation; most of his engravings are thrilling intellectual adventures. The inscription (here as in so many other pictures the letters are reversed as if in a mirror) reads: "This is the lot of all prophets," a gloomy, ironic statement. The most disturbing

aspect of the picture, however, is suggested by the circularity of the composition: the idea of history being an unending aimless monotonous repetition of the same cycles is emphasized by the presence of the wheel; Dózsa's identification with Ixion on his wheel of fire suggests the futility of all human endeavor, the frustration of all human aspiration. The focal point of the wheel, the hub where the spokes or radii of the circle intersect, is constituted by the genitals of the martyr's naked body (quite an unusual form of representation in Hungarian hagiography), the gesture itself reminiscent of Blake's conviction that the naked body is an expression of spiritual truth. The very strong connection between sexuality and the wheel, the emphasis upon the sexual instinct which perpetuates time, suggests the idea—reiterated in the very powerful language of his poems again and again as well as in other graphic works and paintings—that for Kondor as for Blake the creation of the cosmos and the Fall coincide.

Kondor's tragic view of humanity in the universe, which has been defined as "Platonic existentialism," suggests that as soon as human beings appeared in history, they messed up the possibilities held out by Platonic Being (Domokos 331). In his long Platonic dialogue called *Angel, Devil, Poet. A Preliminary But Coherent Essay in Memory of a Dead Poet* [Angyal, ördög, költő. Kezdetleges, de összefüggő tanulmány egy halott költő emlékére], which I would say shows obvi-

ous traces of the influence of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, he conveys his sense of the fragmentation of Being by personifying the divided self: his devils seem to represent the rational—cynical, sarcastic, disillusioned—aspect of the mind, whereas the angels probably stand for the emotive—sentimental, ignorant, innocent—in the human psyche. The Devil says:

When they were released from Paradise men immediately set to the exhausting work of organizing the enormous work camp which soon assumed enormous dimensions. This activity they called theft and cheating at the beginning, later on (as they multiplied and got more and more refined) simply politics, and eventually (as a result of self-deception) production. That was how God was thought up in the human mind.

Blake's contention that the Tree of Mystery grows in the human brain seems to be confirmed by Kondor: the horrors of history are identified with fallen humanity's concept of God.

And, indeed, in Kondor's poems the Gnostic vehemence of the denunciations of the God of the institutionalized religions is strongly reminiscent of the prophetic wrath of Blake attacking humanity's distorted idol, the Starry King "promulgating his ten commands."

In his poem *Man Has Grown from the Naked Child* [Meztelen gyerekből felnőtt az ember...], Kondor describes the process of the naked child, his emblem of the spirit, being clothed in the rags of the body by God, the definition of whom recalls the attributes of Blake's false divinity, the hidden Selfhood, the monster, Urizen. In the first verse paragraph he is called by Kondor the "heavenly monster, the Selfhood hiding in shame." In a later section of the same poem Kondor writes disdainfully:

Once Man was a proud animal
with his untamed and powerful mind he adored
our images and not you. He evoked you, and,
of what was left, after his murderous hunger
was gratified, he cast you a bone, an
offering, Progeny of Idols.
But you clothed him in his shameful
rags, unloosed manifold futile
hungers upon his naked body, which he will
never be able to satisfy, insatiable.

In Kondor's world lust and lies—sexuality and intellectual delusions—are the first and foremost propensities of man. In his bitter poem *Gulliver to the Laputians* [Gulliver a laputaiakhoz], man is defined as an irredeemable procreating, self-deceiving animal:

Each day you erect your cock against the sky,
your mouths are set agape;
through the perishable round O of your body

false words come forth and false
children. Generation increases.

.....
Because the descendants are more numerous
Than all their dead parents.

In Kondor's writings and pictures there is a sense of horror in face of the Platonic concept of the Many.

Though Kondor's greatest ambition was to become a fresco painter and thus practice a communal form of art, he could not obtain commissions and so returned to engraving again and again: he is actually credited with enhancing the reputation of engraving in this country. With reference to his own sporadic statements about the craft it has been suggested that it was perhaps in this medium he eventually found a means of self-transcendence, that is, a solution for one of his most pressing formal problems: how to realize his ideal of impersonality. His obsessive interest in engraving at the same time has been defined as an expression of his awareness that the self has no longer a distinguished place in art or in the universe (Rényi 14, 15). He himself called graphic art "a form of concealment, where the old, great, confused and pure-hearted fancies can hide" (quoted by Németh 1980, 4).

It is this impersonality of expression that fascinated him. Once he said that "To make engravings is a most gratifying thing. The final product emerges between the rollers of the machine and you can admire it freely, without any scruples: after all it is the machine and not you who has made it" (quoted by Németh 1980, 6).

The hard labor involved, the physical and mental difficulties he had to solve in the process of engraving, probably provided a welcome outlet for his immensely intense emotional energies. He seems to have displayed the attitude of the Renaissance craftsman in his poetry as well: art is defined in terms of physical labor which wastes away the body. In his poem "Comforting" ["Vígasztalás"] he says:

As to the poem: it is
a void created
in my body.
And then as in the cloud
caught by the sun
I am aglow
for a few seconds.

He was described by his contemporaries, including his critics and his closest male and female friends, as basically a romantic. One of the witnesses of his life said about him: "In times of happiness, even in the most intense moments of happiness—or especially in those most intense moments—he anticipated tragedy. He lived in intensity that knew no abatement, he lived a life of enhanced receptivity and was thus constantly very close to death" (Tóbiás 42). His world as an artist, poet, thinker, and visionary is built upon the polarities of the ecstasy of Being and the tragedy



7 Mill

of humanity, and most of his work is witness to his gigantic effort to save the world from falling apart. As in the work of the best romantics, in Kondor's work the antinomies between man and woman, angel and devil, order and chaos, the sublime and the grotesque, the murderer and the victim, the man who sits in judgment and the man being judged are dialectically, mutually dependent upon one another. These psychological realities are resolved in the central emblem of his mythology, Jesus, whose life is seen as a heroic attempt to unify through suffering whatever has been torn asunder. Whereas for Blake, Jesus appears to be the Platonic idea of humanity:

The Divine Vision still was seen,
Still was the Human Form Divine,
Weeping in weak & mortal clay,
O Jesus, still the Form was thine. . .

for Kondor, Christ is the emblem of man's metaphysical condition, which is defined by suffering. Kondor's harsh denunciation of the fraudulence of institutionalized Christianity which has abused the teachings of Jesus in order to gratify its own self-seeking interests is reminiscent of Blake's radical anti clericalism. In an interview Kondor said:

The teachings of Jesus are impossible to follow. Because he raises in our way hurdles which, in everyday circumstances, can be jumped over only by a lonely wolf, and a wolf, for that matter, that does not bite. The fate of lonely wolves, however, is death by the gun or starvation. Jesus as a symbol is really independent of history, true in the way that folk tales and poems are, and if a man with his nature would watch our life today, he would not approve, and rightly would he disapprove. No changes have come about, it is only the

centuries that have blown over. . . . The Jesus of the Bible actually did not really want to change things, he wanted to restore the teachings of some ancient wisdom, which had lost their luster and, with it, their power of persuasion. It is natural enough that he fell victim to the vengeful spirit of society, and was abused exactly by those who have created an office for themselves out of his holiness.

Anyway, those who believe in this myth as required by the catechism are happy because they have hope. I don't belong among them. Still I have the capacity for love. (Kondor 12)

His numerous crucifixions represent the mystery of suffering as the inexorable aspect of the human condition (in one the body does not even have the mercy of the cross to support it!). His closest friends knew that "in a metaphysical sense he recognised himself to be a convict who has been judged and found guilty" (quoted by Németh 1980, 51).

He etched his illustrations of Blake, 12 plates, in 1961-62. They evince his recognition of a kindred spirit in Blake and his absorbing interest in Blake's world; the etchings were not commissioned and have never been published as illustrations in the traditional sense of the word. Nine of them (*Blake Dines with Prophets*, *Printing House in Hell*, *Pub in Hell*, *Expect Poison from the Standing Water*, *Church*, *Mill*, *Thy Phantasy Has Imposed upon Me*, *Blake and the Angel*, *Emanation*), as the titles suggest, represent Kondor's own reading of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*; *God Let Us Keep from Newton's Faith!* is a most interesting redefinition of Newton's spirit; *Magnina Trilladora*, in my own interpretation, is a very bitter rendering of some aspects of Blake's sexual ideology as reflected in *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion*; and finally *William and Angel* are documents of Kondor's interest in Blake without, however, reference to any particular poems or tenets.

God Let Us Keep from Newton's Faith [*Newton hitétöl mentsen meg az Isten*] (1961, colored plate; 137 x 150 mm., illus. 11). What seems to be most striking is the geometric austerity of the plate: two triangular planes make up the square that contains the forms, and the emblematic presence of the geometric forms recalls Blake's own iconographic device with which he discloses Newton's restricted way of seeing in his own plate of 1795. Newton's double figure is constructed within bold, definite outlines. The mirror-effect that unifies the double human form, the juxtaposition of the naked and the draped bodies stemming from the same trunk, is echoed in the sophisticated use of colors: the sun is red (in it Los, Kondor's self-portrait, also appears), its "Platonic" reflection is blue, and in the background there is the blue patch of the sea (of Time and Space?). The faces are averted, the heads are hanging, their traditionally central meaning is assumed by the hands: they are most delicately drawn, and contribute most significantly to the ultimate suggestion of the composition. Hands in Kondor's pictures

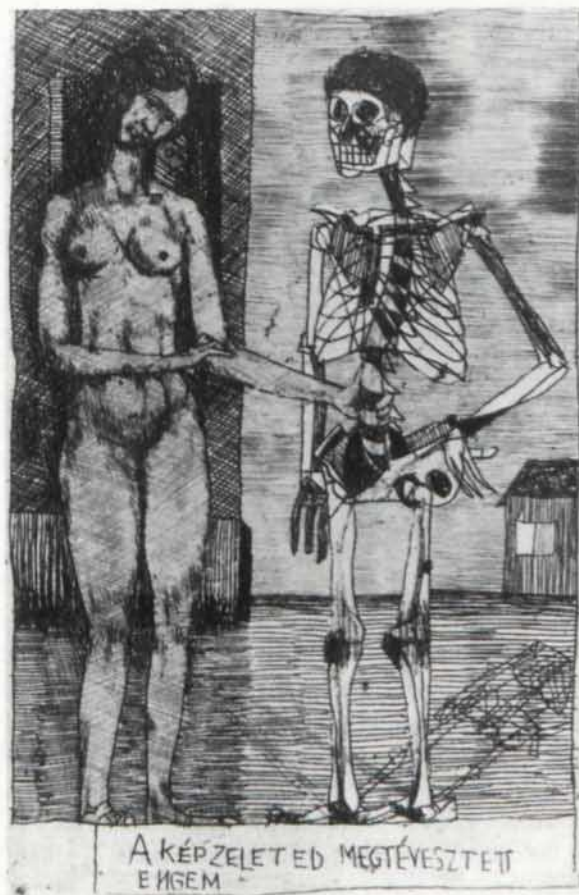
are often associated with creative work. They usually hold some fragile winged things (e.g., airplanes) or creatures (birds) about to soar. Kondor's most celebrated painting, "The Wasp King"—which is said to have become one of the topoi of the Hungarian mind—represents a figure with a crown (or cap and bells) holding a wasp in his hand: the hand both imprisons and launches the creature, creativity and frustration are suggested simultaneously. Newton's universe probably stems from a restricted view of reality; at the same time, however, he is an artist who gives concrete form to error, which is, as we know, an act of Mercy. There are some further motifs well known to Blake scholars: the book about to fall, the chain directing the attention down into the abyss, and the abyss itself, the realm of natural Law, the dominion of gravitation.

The romantic theme of dualism-duality wrecking the human condition emerges in Kondor's writing with characteristic frequency. One of his deeply stirring poems, *Shame and Pride* [*Szégyen és büszkeség*] (the title might be a reference to *To Tirzah*—"The Sexes sprung from Shame & Pride"—included in Szenczi's edition), is a record of a world split asunder as well as supported by enormous cosmic energies:

O, the pair of them: the mountains melting and the
frozen storm on the sea!
Where's the grave delight? It's not on the wings. It's in
our embraces:
like the stone embraced by the water; your life grows
into busy noise.
And they'll never freeze completely, never, the rock and
the sea:
all those unerring foster mothers only change.

Those foster mothers, the things of nature—mountain and water—the processes in nature—melting and freezing—the dialectic contraries will never cease. They are perhaps reconciled for a transient moment in the illusion created by our embraces.

Blake *Dines with Prophets* [*Blake prófétákkal vacsorázik*] (140 x 100 mm., illus. 2). Here again the concept of the representation is based on the idea of duality. The visual contrast between the prophets and "Blake" discloses the contrast between vision and reality. The pathos and the dignity of Isaiah and Ezekiel are created by the organic network of the delicately etched, curving lines and the blank spaces that fill them in. On the other hand, the black figure's presence is presence through absence: the rigid, indivisible solid black patch calls into question the faith of those archaic visionaries. This black figure in his suit and top hat is a recurring motif in Kondor's pictures: sometimes in his breast there is a hole with two hands which tell the time, whereas on his arm, where the wristwatch should be, is a small shape like the traditional emblem of the heart. In that particular scene "Blake" is immured in his temporal self; incidentally, his



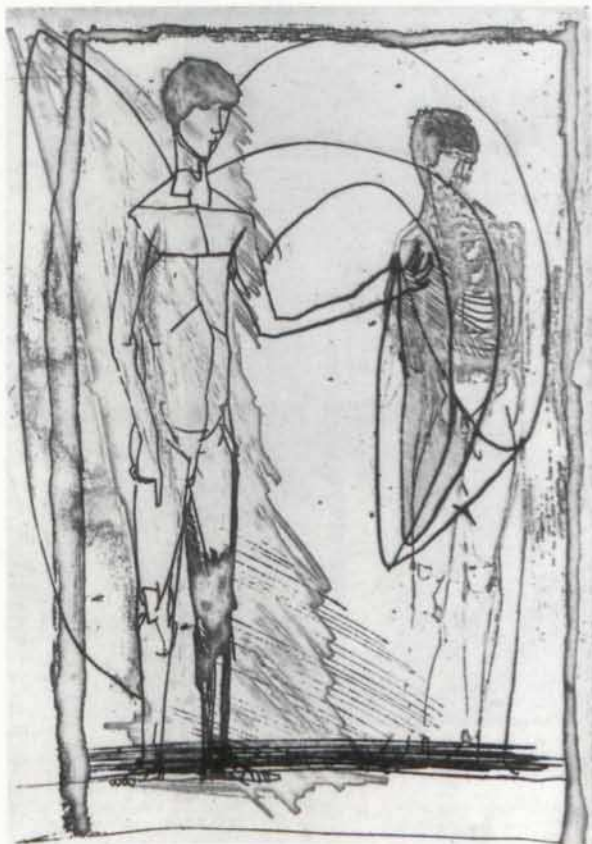
8 Thy Phantasy Has Imposed upon Me

chair is supported by books; he is relying upon the type of knowledge that can be contained in writing, or sanctioned by authority.

The *Pub in Hell* [*Pokolbeli kocsmá*] (286 x 184 mm., illus. 4). In his poem, "The Continuation of Our Conversation" ["Beszélgetésünk folytatása"], Kondor says:

... This world aspires
sideways and upwards.
The ruin of a castle visited by breezes.

The composition of *The Pub in Hell* is based on lines going sideways and upwards. The closed space is created by a vertical staircase, vaulted windows, the perpendicular structure of a Gothic interior counterbalanced by the horizontal axis composed by the interaction of the female and male figures bound to face each other sooner or later. The flight of stairs leads nowhere; the ladder, another symbol of ascent, is grotesquely small. In the upper left corner and on the right there are two winged creatures obviously arrested in their flight by the strict limits of the space. The horizontal and vertical axes are contrasted in the center of the composition by the wheel which stands still. Ascent and descent are counterbalanced; a stalemate is produced and creates an atmosphere of doom.



9 Blake and the Angel

The male figure who is pushed into the pub by the hardly visible, sinister black figure in the top hat (who bars the way to retreat) is an anachronism in this mythical place: he is an outlaw well known in Hungarian popular tradition who belongs to the unbounded plains, the "puszta," and is exempt from the laws. Outlaw and horse in Hungarian folk tradition are one entity, which suggests that the figure might be interpreted as a self-portrait: in some of his poems Kondor defines one of his selves as mounted on a horse.

The Woman, the Tempter (she probably corresponds to Blake's Vala) with the pair of balances, might be associated with Themis in Greek mythology, who represents the laws governing the relationship of the sexes as well as the relationship of the immortals and the mortals; she also is the mother of the Horae, that is, of Time. Both horse and balances, however, might be traced back to another source, to the language and imagery of Revelation which haunt Kondor's imagination as much as they permeate Blake's works. Revelation 6:5 reads: "And when he had opened the third seal, I heard the third beast say, Come and see. And I beheld, and lo, there was a black horse: and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand."

The Pub in Hell is a vision of the Last Judgment. Man will be judged by this indifferent female who knows only a limited

scope of choice, a choice between two ways of perdition: one of the scales is inscribed with the word "credit" (submission to social rules governed by getting or spending money); the other one bears the apple (sexuality) as an icon.

In Kondor's world the problem of sexuality is unresolved, which is another motif that indicates his very close kinship with Blake. In a number of poems the disillusionment replacing the promise of regeneration through love is expressed most poignantly:

Because once all gets reversed,
All ties that bind in a sense of sin expire:
In the midst of desired kisses the taste will stale,
Those once united languish in captivity,
and even solitude will give no pleasure.

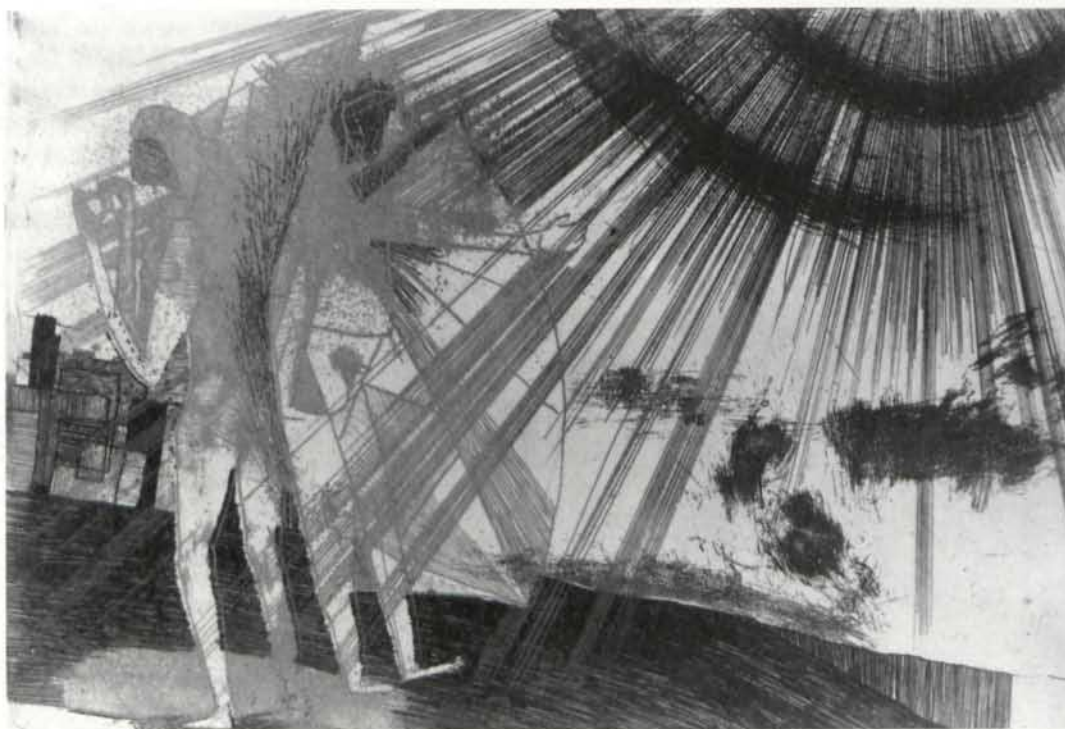
The "Request" ["Kérés"] can be read as a modern version of "The Crystal Cabinet":

Why should we want, with our mute desires,
to conquer this beautiful body again and again?

... racked on the rack of the instincts,
the heart, the color of flesh, of blood, contracts
and lo! it wants to enter, hot,
quick, the secret, to its own destruction.
Thus the meaning gets lost of itself
and joins the objects of our life,
as it should, in Time.

My only request is: Alter everything.

The Printing House in Hell [Pokolbeli nyomda] (engraving, 240 x 240 mm., illus. 3). Some of the elements of the Gothic interior are still there, but what seems to dominate the plate is the enormously complicated machinery with cogwheels and conveyor belts, and, on top of the terrifying structure an airplane with a pilot leaning out of its window with a gun in his hand. The threat he represents is counterbalanced by the calm of the small figure sitting on the floor completely absorbed in arranging his string of letters: the crowded composition coheres thanks to the counterpoint of terror and peace. The gun is pointed at a monster who stands at the steering wheel of the huge machine: on his back the letters NEMO (NOBODY) can be deciphered. On the right can be seen Blake's men who arrange the books in libraries. In the center there is a plate in which line 7 of "A Song of Liberty" is engraved: "In her trembling hand she took the new born terror." The picture illustrates how very deeply Kondor understood Blake's *Marriage*: the idea of the correspondence of the macrocosm and the microcosm, the identity of the world outside and the world inside, the interconnection of history and human thinking. His analysis of the creative process involves a great deal of emphasis upon the extremity of the pain and horror. The instinctive, irra-



tional, spontaneous energies are coordinated and channelled into the coherence of the form. The threat of failure, the threat of the loss of balance, is obviously also there. The most interesting question is raised by NEMO: is it a reference to the annihilation of the self as an essential condition for artistic work, or is the monster a representation of Blake's Giants "who formed the world into its sensuous existence . . . the sources of all activity"? Very little is as yet known about Kondor's own mythical animals.

The plates *Church [Templom]* (87 x 110 mm., illus. 6), *Mill [Malom]* (230 x 245 mm., illus. 7) and *Thy Phantasy Has Imposed upon Me [Képzeteled megtévesztett engem]* (105 x 65 mm., illus. 8) are the records of Kondor's reading of Blake's journey with the Angel in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* during which they both witness their eternal lot.

Magnina Trilladora [Magnina Trilladora] (watercolored plate, 198 x 254 mm., illus. 12) seems to be a visual rendering of the plight of the virgin and the youth described in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. The title itself may be a reference to the flower, the Marygold, that Oothoon plucks in Leutha's vale. Up in the left corner a male figure can be seen with a net catching a bird, probably a reference to the episode of the rape; the female figure at the point of the golden section might have been suggested by Blake's indignant denunciation of loveless marriage: in the woman's

womb there is the abhorred cherub, the fruit of "the wheel of false desire." The wheel itself is in the center of the picture; it is driven by the legislator of this hypocritical world (Urizen?) and the machine has a guillotine-like device attached to it whose blade is about to drop upon the neck of the masturbating youth.

Kondor's interest in Blake was so strong that he wrote two poems which are directly addressed to Blake as Kondor's tributes to his master.

"Happiness Fragment, To Mr. W. B. in the Beyond most respectfully" ["Boldogságtörődék, W. Blake úrnak tisztelettel a másvilágra"]

The golden Sun's found his way
under the little skirts
of the grave clouds.

And with his fivefold rays
in his golden way he strokes
and feels the bulging Earth.

With his other golden hand
he undoes the strings of the clouds
to press against her naked.

Window is there none



and there is no house,
no clothes, no shelter,
and the golden shame will cease!

This seems to be a nuptial hymn celebrating the embrace of Sun and Earth irradiated by the gold of the icons. This marriage grants a vision of absolute freedom, an end of all restrictions (window, house, shame). In the poem already quoted above, "Shame and Pride," Kondor describes the condition of unified seeing engendered by love, which, however, is shattered soon enough by reality:

Still bold in my happiness, I loved a God, who
was a woman.
Now I can see the shameless enormous water,
the uncouth
mountain, not only the iridescent air.

The "Holy Trinity" of water, mountain and air is created by human perception in moments when it is redeemed by love.

Mr. Blake

Now with an axe close to his hand the Fool
returns the smiles of lovely women.
The light sunshine hardens.
Mr. Blake is coming here smiling, holding

the hand of a string of woven letters, a woman.
On his back the burden of books; he, too, is heavy and
fat.

And then a black cloud rises up from the rock
and lead and dust and ashes settle around me.
The terrible emanation of the Sun hardens!

The false god that lives among the clouds, looks down.
You.

"My darling," says the boring, seedy mistress. And again
the light freezes;
nothing remains but what will be.

Taking the gold sunshine by the hand, the golden
cloud is dissolving; in beauty and dignity
cheap women emerge. Again.

Now with an axe close to his hand Mr. Blake
returns the smile of the Lord God. And now from the
black
rock a dust of lead, cursing and devils arises.

But then empty talk is forbidden by the Lord.

The poem is probably an attempt to recreate the spirit of Blake which, however, ends in failure ("empty talk is forbidden by the Lord"). Kondor appropriates some of Blake's characteristic gestures and conveys his respect for a master he probably considers superior to himself. The axe is re-



peatedly mentioned as an attribute of Blake: Kondor has enigmatic knives, daggers, axes in his pictures as well; for instance, in one of his paintings, *The Judge*, which is a beautiful vision in soft pink, gold and white, the archangel has a blue dagger in his mouth. In a poem entitled "Three Preliminary Essays" ["Három előtanulmány"] he seems to suggest that the precision of expression must have the sharpness of a knife: "even as the knife, the words, the breath."

In Kondor's definition of Blake's artistic world a distinction is made between the false god hiding behind the barrier of the clouds and the Lord who seems "to establish his covenant" with the poet (another element of the romantic legacy in Kondor's philosophy: the creative word of the poet has almost the status of the Holy Word): he smiles and his smile is returned, and then the poem is made. In Kondor, creative work, the work of the poet, of the artist is frequently expressed in imagery connected with mining. In "No Slave Is the Poem" ["Nem szolgál a vers"], a document of his desire to transcend the personal ego, Kondor says:

.....
The word resounds in the cavity
of pillar-supported bright pits.
The audience is darkened,
the warm light dissolves
and in a loud voice the glittering coal
burns to ashes.
He is pale then, he is empty,
the creator, now.

And eventually Kondor also seems to see that for Blake (probably in the same way as for himself) there is a mysterious connection between artistic creation and sexuality.

Kondor's last public show in 1970 was opened by the poet Pilinszky, who was one of Kondor's very few close friends in his utter solitude. Pilinszky defined Kondor's art in the following words: "He is a relative of both Fra Angelico and Dostoevsky. . . . He is one of the tragically and cathartically great paradoxical artists. His lines have an ethereal clarity, his patches emanate bloodshot brutality. . . . The pictures exhibited here come back to us already from the bourne of articulation and silence" (Pilinszky 2: 165).

The chronology of the composition of the poems is not known. Kondor obviously wanted to disconnect his utterances from the temporal events of both his life and the history of his time (on the reverse side of one of his drafts Kondor wrote: "Mix up dates"), but one has the impression that *Angel, Devil, Poet* is already a preparation for silence. In its coda, "Funeral Oration," one of Kondor's angel alter egos says: "I can't help being amazed, since death appears not in a specific earthly form like birth, for instance, but it is hunger in the moment preceding a great feast, simple, certain and pleasant hunger since it promises a table laid. I know what kind of dishes are made ready for me," said the Angel, and he lost his body and he lost his soul, too, with thanksgiving. And he returned to nothing where everything is." Kondor's historical experience left no room for much hope concerning the improvement of the human condition; he had no faith in redemption. Still, he shared Blake's exalted



concept of art. In one of his poems, "An Essay on Colors" ["Értekezés a színekről"], he says:

And green is a thin hoop
So that the sea should not spill
—that angry sea—
smoke, sulphur and breath
should not erupt
when the Lord God is
too lazy to watch.

Until you are ready to "return to nothing where everything is," it is creative work that can offer at least partial redemption.

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