

„Journey to no-dust”? *Literary tropes of Transcendence*

Zbigniew Trzaskowski

UNIWERSYTET JANA KOCHANOWSKIEGO W KIELCACH

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Abstract

Metaphysical themes occupy an indispensable place in literary works, given their horizontal-vertical dimension. On the basis of ethical-existential, religious and cultural categories, the author answers the question: What traces of religious longing and Judeo-Christian heritage can the reader find in contemporary literature?

The phenomenon of the progressive secularisation of many areas of life, the atrophy of religious substance in society, cannot be stopped. People reflecting on this state of affairs often fail to realise that the increasing distance between religion and culture, the institution of the Church and society, is not only due to the secularisation of our times, but is inextricably linked to Enlightenment tendencies. The Enlightenment, recognising the primacy of the educational function, subordinated literature to it, making it a tool of ideology. The Enlightenment model, reinforced by positivist scientism, was applied by ideological regimes. The extreme poles of ideological literature were occupied by the atheist and the fideist.

The ideas of freedom and reason, central the French Revolution, reached the general public thanks to easier communication between people, especially in the cities, and led to a critique of religious forms and religion itself. The former aimed to correct errors and distortions, and called for reform, understood as a return to the sources. The second struck at the very founda-

tion of faith, attempting to prove that belief in God was merely man's delusion. It was not God who created man, but man who created God for himself. Ludwig Feuerbach, a representative of the theory of compensation, formulated the thesis: „A poor man has a rich God“. In the process of projection, people transfer their unrealisable longing-imaginings onto an extraterrestrial being, i.e. God. This one has everything that man dreams of. Moreover, accepting the existence of God prevents man from becoming free and mature¹. Sigmund Freud secured the psychological theories of compensation and projection. The criticism of religion itself, albeit in a simplified form and often only in the form of slogans, e.g. „the opium of the people“, was continued by Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin. In their ideology, religion is not only a means of consolation, sought by the underprivileged classes, but also a means of promise, distributed to them by the privileged classes. A radical critique of religion, still affecting today, came from Friedrich Nietzsche. Man must kill God in order to regain his lost freedom and being himself.

While the great works of the Baroque era (literature, music, art) were created at the behest of the institutions of the Church and were permeated by the Christian spirit, the cultural output of the following periods tended to stray away from ecclesiastical tradition. What was born in the following centuries in close connection with the churches is to a large extent – with exceptions, especially the architecture of the 20th century – merely epigonal commercial art serving to illustrate, entertain, build, teach, orient and celebrate worship. The so-called Christian artists drew almost exclusively from existing models, looked backwards thematically and formally and had little influence on the general cultural life of a particular era. This judgement can be applied to the so-called Christian literature of the following centuries up to the present day. In the context of the history of European literature, the aforementioned influence represents only a reproducible marginal phenomenon and was overestimated by church circles in the post-war period as a time-defining factor. *De facto* Christian authors wrote beyond the era, e.g. Gertrud von Le Fort. The actual literary life, which like a seismograph senses future developments, draws prophetic images and determines public opinion, developed for centuries outside the ecclesiastical frame of reference. The great names of twentieth-century literature – Joseph Conrad, Rainer Maria Rilke, Thomas Mann, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, William Faulkner, Mikhail Bulgakov, Gabriel García Márquez, and others – were only received by a wide range of Catholic readers belatedly or not at all.

¹ L. Feuerbach, *Das Wesen der Religion*, Leipzig 1849, passim, [in:] *Das Wesen der Religion: Ludwig Feuerbach: Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming: Internet Archive* (acc. 16 X 2024).

Today, people are only vaguely aware of the „loss of culture“ by the institution of the Church, as the influence of the Churches as a whole is declining across Europe. The secularisation of all walks of life in the process of globalisation has penetrated the last village through the fluid distribution of media and has affected all sections of the population. As the individual seeks his or her own place in the world outside the Church's ruling order, social cultural and artistic creativity has also taken on a life of its own.

If one looks at the statements made by writers relating to religion, it is surprising how openly most of them convey information. Almost everyone's experience shows that the development of faith from a child's naive certainty to an adult's undermined confidence is a process that is rarely successful. In childhood, religious rites are practised, prayers are said, songs are sung, commandments are observed, dogmas and moral principles are taught. Many literary creators have lost their faith, some unnoticed, others consciously as a result of decisions, disappointments, wounds. By moving out of their parents home, quite a few freed themselves from the supposed corset of church life. Others sought God in the inner world, in everyday life, in Eastern teachings on salvation. The longing for something more, for the other, for transcendence is present in most of them and can be read in their works, but the question remains: why do these thoughtful people emphasise so much the external aspects of church life? Why do they so rarely get to the heart of the religious message? Almost none of them have paid attention to the changes in theology, biblical exegesis, preaching and community life that began in the 1960s. Why do these facts not reach them?

However, an individual's biography and personal beliefs are only one side of the disharmony between artists and the Church; the other is due to the different nature of the two sides. The Church, as a tradition-shaped religious community, is oriented towards unchanging dogmas, its historicity relating to the life and culture of its members rather than to the essence of their faith. Literature, on the other hand, reacts to individual and social life in the historical course of time, presents it, creates new models and is therefore subject to constant change. Even when it addresses the familiar questions of the „whence and whither“ of human existence, of love and hate, of guilt and forgiveness, of life and death. As the world changes, the perspective of literature also changes. This fundamental difference, above all, must be accepted at all levels. The absolute influence of the Church on literature leads to its dogmatic definition and ideological narrowing. Literature then becomes the handmaiden of the Church, exhausting itself in illustrating dogmatic truths, which ultimately negates its aesthetic character. On the other hand, the Church would lose its orienting mission by completely clinging to all as-

pects of literature, and literature would succumb to the danger of becoming a substitute religion through mystification, which would completely overwhelm literary authors on their arduous path of truth-seeking. Ultimately, the Church and literature relate to each other like the guardians of the Grail *versus* the seekers of the Grail.

How fruitful an exchange could have been if the Church had seriously addressed the prophetic dimension of literature. And how deeply artists could penetrate if they trusted the biblical message of faith handed down in the Church and placed its message about the Absolute, creation and people at the centre of their reflections, without losing themselves in peripheral concerns.

Apart from this difference, as is well known, the Church and literature have much in common, in the sense that both realities concern people's lives. The task of religion has always been to provide standards of orientation to ensure human action. On the one hand, providing answers to immanent questions about the origin of life and life after death. On the other hand, satisfying man's longing for the transcendent. For transcendence is the elevation of the human spirit beyond the limits of its material, physical existence, which is sometimes experienced by all, whether they are non-believers or religious. The birth of a human being creates a particular unveiling of transcendence, part of which is the bliss of love, the feeling of joy and probably also the experience of death. Literature can capture the experience of the beginning and convey it to readers. In a secular, materialistic culture, this must somehow correspond to what the believer finds in worshipping his God.

Salman Rushdie, against the background of his experience with fundamentalist religious practice, assigns an almost mythical role to literature. He sees in literary art the necessary counter-model to the pervasive power of the liberal, materialist social order, for once the socialist utopia has collapsed, it is difficult to clash with any other counter-model except theocratic fundamentalist Islam. Rushdie, however, strongly opposes the prophetic role of literature. In its form, it appears too provisional, ambiguous and misleading, which can easily be verified by the individual examples contained in *The Satanic Verses*².

Botho Strauß argues differently in an essay on George Steiner's book *On the Real Present. Does our speech have content? (Von realer Gegenwart. Hat unser Sprechen Inhalt?)*, the basic thesis of which is extremely instructive for defining the relationship between literature and religion. Wherever the experience of meaning takes place in literary works, it is ultimately about an undoubtedly rationally incomprehensible meaning that testifies to the real pre-

² Vide: S. Rushdie, *Ist denn nichts heilig? Über die notwendige Konkurrenz zwischen Literatur und Dogma*, [in:] „Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung”, 10 II 1990.

sence of the Logos-God. Strauss speaks of a rediscovery of the „theophanic glory“ and the „transcendent neighbourhood“ of the cultural text³. Wherever the question of meaning arises in a poem, novel, play or film – even in the context of superficial representations – there the epiphany of the Absolute shines through. The unconventional, daring idea, however well-known for a long time, is being revitalised and, from a phenomenological perspective, makes it possible to identify the theological dimension of cultural texts from the fields of literature, film and art. It is clear that works of literature or visual art are not only works with explicitly religious or Christian themes. However, one has to ask what else is included in a broad conception of transcendence. It all depends on whether one implicitly accepts the theophanic role of literature, the theophanic mediating position, and whether it gives rise to a new vitality. If not, a twofold danger may arise: a thicket of duplicity in the literary games of the intellect and thus a progressive oblivion or, worse, an outbreak of religious fundamentalism. Literature, on the other hand, will be well served by ambiguity and ambivalence.

Memory and expectation, the opposites of forgetting and perpetuating, inspire literary creators. There are enough works today in which, in terms of structure and theme, the presence of God-Logos can be discerned. However, they are not adequately received, despite their undeniable, unchanging heterophany. Only the recipient, the gifted, the puzzled reader remain hidden, perplexed and, avoiding responsibility, resort to methodical talk of everything and nothing⁴.

The latter applies not only to journalism as a method, to commentary disciplines of all kinds, to the scientific discourses of post-structuralism, but also to the way the institution of the Church treats literary works. Some in her circle in religious literature try to rationally determine whether a literary work functions properly in a dogmatic sense. In doing so, they forget to carefully perceive, look and listen. This attitude requires objectivity, the absence of any preconceptions and an openness to the new. The well-known words of Nelly Sachs: „We have long forgotten listening“, with which she responds to the verse of Isaiah: „[...] before they appear I tell you of them“ (42:9b), have lost none of their relevance after more than half a century:

³ B. Strauß, *Der Aufstand gegen die sekundäre Welt. Anmerkungen zu einer Ästhetik der Anwesenheit*, [in:] G. Steiner, *Von realer Gegenwart. Hat unser Sprechen Inhalt?*, München / Wien 1990, p. 303–320.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 317.

If the prophets broke in
 through the doors of the night
 and sought an ear as a homeland
 [...]

 The ear of humanity
 you busy with a little overhearing

 would you hear?

Wenn die Propheten einbrächen
 durch Türen der Nacht
 und ein Ohr wie eine Heimat suchten

 Ohr der Menschheit
 du mit dem kleinen Lauschen
 beschäftigtes,
 würdest du hören?⁵.

In the tension of memory and expectation, the writer or director creates his or her work, and in a similar tension, between previous experience and expected benefit, the receptive reader or viewer receives the literary or cinematic work of art.

Over the past thirty years, two main issues have been running through literary scholars' discussion of literary texts: the concept of „religious“ language and literature, and the way in which writers approach the Bible and the Christian heritage. The term „religious“ is used in „religious book“, „religious film“, „religious language“ in a completely unreflective, almost naïve way, or applied more broadly to anything that has to do with the boundary issues of human life. The same applies to „religious language“. The need for its reform is currently being discussed. Finding satisfactory answers to the questions: by what means to revive „religious language“, which sources to use for this purpose, is still difficult. Many people in the fields of education, cultural activities, literary criticism use the term „religious“ almost daily in a machinic way and easily communicate among themselves on „religious“ topics. However, few take the trouble to define the term „religious“ more precisely. We generally find it difficult to pin it down, but in everyday language we handle it effortlessly and successfully. We talk about „religious“ poetry, a „religious person“, the „religious background“ of a play, the „religious origin“ of a psychological conflict, *et cetera*. We know well how to use the word „religious“ correctly and communicate. It is only when the question „What is religious?“ arises that many get into trouble. The practitioner, let alone the literary scholar, oriented towards conceptual clarity, cannot be content with a cursory description of religious experience.

Religion describes man's fundamental behaviour towards the transcendent Instance that fills his life, liberates him from the limitations of temporal existence and endows him with eschatological hope. The Christian calls it „God“. Throughout history, people have perceived God's will differently. The very ethos of their behaviour has been subject to differently organised social

⁵ N. Sachs, *** *Wenn die Propheten einbrächen*, [in:] eadem, *Werke*, t. 1: *Gedichte 1940-1950*, ed. M. Weichelt, Berlin 2010, p. 58sq.

structures, deriving from a basic behaviour towards God. The forms of socialisation of this behaviour have been given the name of religion.

People expect the various religions to provide answers to the unsolved riddles of human existence, still deeply touching human hearts today: Who is man? What is the meaning and purpose of life? What is good and what is evil? Where does suffering come from and does it make sense? What is the path to true happiness? What is death, judgment and punishment after death? And finally – What is the ultimate and unspeakable mystery of human existence, where does it come from and where does it go?

Literary scholars have adopted the broad concept of religion in their research practice over the last forty years and applied it to a large number of cultural texts presenting general questions about human existence. If it is true that the religious question includes questions about what is ultimate, what has value and concerns absolute truth, right conduct, the meaning of life, identity and the future of man, then religious themes in literature appear in positive or negative form whenever answers to the above questions are given. Very often without our awareness or reflection.

However, the question arises as to what such a broad concept achieves. Certainly, it provides the opportunity to track down a few sprouting plants in an almost empty field. However, there is little to be gained by doing so. About fifty years ago, this opening became necessary when a new generation of believing authors tried to free themselves from the narrow camp of explicitly „Christian“ literature and protested against a euphemistic and reassuring literature of consolation, partly in cryptic metaphorical language and partly in provocative language games in the form of ambiguities, paradoxes, word games. Their protest proved effective. In the following period, numerous theologians (although far fewer literary scholars rejected an existential or religious approach to literature as inappropriate for a linguistic work of art) tackled contemporary literature and discovered a wealth of „religious“ tropes, references and perspectives.

In the context of Transcendence, the answer to the question of the relationship between the Bible and literature seems easier. New research methodologies, interesting studies by scholars or literary authors themselves, have emerged which emphasise the intrinsic value of the Book of Books and deal with the processing of biblical motifs. The wealth of literary works based on biblical sources only confirms the functionality of almost every research approach.

Many writers deal with their children's faith and practices in European churches. Christians, thanks to the media, especially the internet, have easier access to works with a worldview-provoking slant without officially pre-

criticising them (index of banned books). In any case, one thing seems clear and worth emphasising: most authors are not concerned with profaning the truths of the faith, but rather with depicting a structural abuse of them. This is meant to shock readers/viewers and make them look deeper.

However, it has become clear that the question of Transcendence in literary discourse today needs to be posed in a more multifaceted way⁶. Hence the demand for an in-depth reflection on man's bond with a higher Being and responsibility to a higher Authority, as well as on the *mysterium fascinosum*, the bewitching mystery that arouses human awe and ultimately leads to worship. The question of the meaning of life is not exclusively identified with religion to the extent that existential experiences can be religiously identified at all. This limitation also applies when biblical motifs or liturgical metaphors are cited in literary texts. It therefore seems sensible to distinguish three categories of literary creation: ethical-existential, transcendental-religious and Judeo-Christian.

The **ethical-existential** category includes texts with general human themes, *exempli modo* the question of I and You, insights into personal failure, concern for the environment, sharing of goods, commitment to social justice and peace, issues of illness and death. They introduce the reader to extraordinary facts of the human world and, by posing questions about personal life plans, encourage personal reflection. However occasionally they represent the experience of attachment to established orders and laws, they do not go beyond the visible and do not open a window to another, larger world. They remain within the shell of the limited space of human experience, even as they describe flights to the moon, space travel. Many are convinced that man could use his powers to create a good world, a paradise, if only circumstances changed. All these texts cannot be classified as „religious“, „latent“ or „anonymous“ religious, but rather existential or ethical. Ultimately, they remain horizontal, in the anteroom of faith.

Examples are texts that explicitly pose the question of the meaning of existence, revolving around what is often referred to today as the „religious“ question. Sometimes they use biblical metaphors and mythological figures, recognising them as a premonition of a direct dialogue with something divine (*numinosum*). For such authors, the poem, the novel and the drama have mythological qualities, albeit in the sense of an empty Transcendence, i.e. they are texts without sacrum, God and gods, equipped with a solemn tone of speaking to an undefined You who can no longer be imagined as the addressee. The almost banal events of the everyday world acquire existential

⁶ Vide: *The Poetics of Transcendence*, ed. E. Heinämäki / P. M. Mehtonen / A. Salminen, Amsterdam 2015.

meaning through the formulation of intermediate questions and „answers“ given in the form of new questions. The temporal topics (past, present, future) of the „answer-questions“ correspond with the temporal adverbs of the „output“ questions (yesterday, today, tomorrow). Such works do not give answers to people’s questions about the reason (why), the purpose (where), the meaning (what for) of life, even in the most extreme situation – „you must know“. Authors formulate questions, explain their urgency, awaken them in the reader’s mind, but leave the answer open-ended.

Transcendental-religious category. If man, in the experience of love and community, fear and loneliness, suffering and death, reaches the limits of his capacity to know and feel. If he does not regard the ego as the centre and destiny of the universe, but transcends his own experience, then he becomes a subject referred to the ultimate, all-pervading source of meaning. In a voluntary act, he acknowledges his dependence on him, aware that to him he owes his life. This kind of experience usually leads to wonder, meditative contemplation, and often to worship or adoration. Since prehistory, the aforementioned factors have formed the fabric of religion. Texts *expressis verbis* explaining these issues can be described as religious. „This is especially true of reflective lyric poetry dealing with fundamental issues of human existence“⁷: affirmation, dignity, integrity of the subject, love, faith, freedom.

Man exists at the intersection of immanent (assimilated) and transcendent (alien) realities; named and unnamed; at the intersection of his own history and the history of the universe; at the intersection of culture and nature. The assimilated and the named make up culture. By naming things, phenomena, feelings, people relate the known concept to the unknown, that is, they incorporate it into the realm of their imagination. Language defines man’s reality with its systems he wraps around the range of his own observations and experiences. Nature is always further away than linguistic reality. By the act of naming, man either affirms his solitude in the cosmos or acknowledges a transcendent relationship with the Absolute. Thus, we are faced with a dilemma: either God, who as a sign belongs to linguistic-cultural reality, is the work of humans, or culture in its linguistic core refers man to a transcendent reality.

Many works of contemporary literature provide a clear view and open the reader to Transcendence, although not always so clearly in all authors. Many approach religious content very cautiously; others focus more on asking questions than on answers. A person who knows nothing about eschatological infinity can very well recognise his own finitude. If he does not expe-

⁷ K. Dybciak, *Trudne spotkanie. Literatura polska XX wieku wobec religii*, Kraków 2005, p. 34.

rience suffering and death as signs of his limitations, he will not experience the phenomenon that he has become as he is through processes beyond his control. He cannot appeal directly to God. He can only act with more or less conviction that God exists. Man is considered religious even when he cannot go beyond questioning and wonder, as long as he remains open to the answer and leaves a free space for the Transcendent.

Judeo-Christian tradition. Few today would expect a confessional treatment of problems of faith in literary works, as was the case in the works of Sigrid Undset, Georges Bernanos, Paul Claudel, Graham Greene, Gertrud von Le Fort, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, Zofia Kossak-Szczucka, François Mauriac, Roman Brandstaetter. The question arises: what is specifically Jewish and what is Christian in literature? Is everything that makes up Judeo-Christian literature written by Jews or Christians, such as the works of Paul Celan, Nelly Sachs, for example, Judeo-Christian literature? Do they also include works that secularise Christ's message of love and peace in the humanist sense? Literature that does not falsify the image of human existence, but shows what is authentic and unique in it, what hurts human beings, and at the same time makes them realise that with the effort of free will they can make it better. Literature that counters the evil glare with a loving gaze. Literature so accurate and true that it can no longer leave the heads of its readers – such literature deserves to be called Christian. Its archetypes are the allegorical tales of creation, the building of the temple and the giving of laws, bondage, wandering and liberation. The Judeo-Christian sacred appears in the melodious phrases of the psalms; in the exclamations of Job and Jeremiah, in the aphorisms of the Ecclesiasticus and the Book of Wisdom, befitting everyday life; in the visionary poems of Isaiah and Ezekiel; in the fervent pastoral journalism of the apostles of Jesus, the apocalyptic symbolism of John the Evangelist.

Religious meaning, a religious attitude of speech, a religious horizon emerge from many literary works without revealing or intending to approach confessional or dogmatic teaching content. The reader recognises the Christian element in many poems by their association with Christian content, characters, motifs, images. If the definition of Christianity were so clear, there would be no discussion of key words. Christianity as a mere social or historical „material“ is not enough. The Christian perspective encompasses the speaking attitude and the faith of the writer (speaker). Faith is an element of the Christian (religious) text. If we consider the aergocentric context of the writer's oeuvre, which repeatedly features the self struggling for the Christian faith, we can rightly speak of a poem written in a Christian spirit.

What can be clearly defined in terms of definition often proves problematic for individual texts. How far can interpretation go in relation to religious

or Judeo-Christian aspects? The concept of a religious or Christian person is not in the dictionary, it cannot be clearly expressed. What work should then be called Christian? Does the definition depend on the faith of the author? The reader? The editor? The intermediary? There is a whole range of texts dealing with the Christian faith, especially faith in the resurrection. Various things related to the Church stimulate literary creation: basilicas, grave crosses, bells, the Stations of the Cross, the confessional, the vicarage. This makes it clear that such an attribution does not depend solely on vocabulary or the author's intentions, but the reader's reception and understanding should be considered as decisive factors.

This raises another question: are many texts not misused for religious interpretation – despite the objections of some interpreters? Aren't religious „trace hunters“ using particular authors against their intentions? This is certainly sometimes the case. But the accusations can ultimately be dismissed, and in three ways.

Primo: it is undoubtedly important to understand what drove the author's creation and what position he takes on religious issues. From here, a statement of possible intention can be made. It is a catch-all for religious-Judeo-Christian interpretation when text, intention and belief are in agreement. However, the desire for total congruence can, to the detriment of interpretation, degenerate into a meticulous tracing of the author's thinking strategy.

Secundo: with publication, each text begins to live a life of its own. Even the author can no longer resist this process. Writers are often surprised when they find out how others understand their work. It is superfluous to emphasise that, in the case of religious-Christian interpretation, the text should contain clear signals about this. Otherwise, the objection quoted above would apply.

Tertio: ultimately, each reader approaches a literary work differently, interpreting it according to his or her biography, knowledge of language, understanding of images, prior literary knowledge and, finally, his or her faith. This is in accordance with the law of individual reception. A responsible interpreter will always carefully present this fact as his or her reading and not the author's intention.

Without an in-depth knowledge of the authors' biographies and religious beliefs, it is difficult to consider a text as „Christian“. This means that too much is demanded of both authors and interpreters, from whom additional references would be required. Readers perceive as „Christian“ many texts whose authors do not profess Christianity, but convey Christian ideas within their subject matter, imagery, and intentions. This is a common process since the canonisation of biblical writings. The charge of inclusion or appropriation is of course legitimate, but the law of the life of the published

text and the freedom of the reader also applies, insofar as the reader does not attribute his or her own interpretation to the author's intentions. The clarity of assigning texts to one category or another is fraught with the danger of ideological narrowness. Labelling works as „Christian“ literature shifts the level of observation from literary-aesthetic to spiritual-ethical standards and ultimately violates the autonomy of the literary work. It is better, therefore, to speak of religious or transcendental elements in literature than of *strictly* „religious“ literature.

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