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Literature and religion. On the need for religious studies reflection in the sphere of literary studies

I

Mutual intellectual and spiritual relations between philosophy and religion have established themselves in the European scientific awareness owing to the tradition of ancient, early-Christian and medieval thought. Naturally, these relations very often manifested themselves due to the philosophical disputes with religion. However, not many people of the intellectual culture of the time negated the peculiar bond, sometimes even based on dislike, that used to connect philosophy and religion. This problem has begun to be perceived in a different way in the modern era. First of all, it was the Enlightenment that brought not only intensified criticism of religion, but also bore fruit in the form of an aspiration to debase it.¹ On the other hand, G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) adopted a peculiar attitude at the time, reminding his contemporaries of the importance of the mutual relations and connections between philosophy and religion. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, he contained the following words, inter alia: “The object of religion as well as of philosophy is eternal truth in its objectivity, God and nothing but God, and the explication of God. Philosophy is not a wisdom of the world, but is knowledge of what is not of the world”².

The invoked considerations bespeak not only the tasks that the philosopher assigned to the two types of human intellectual and spiritual activity in question, but also the fact

¹ More on this topic: cf. e.g. Z. Drozdowicz, *Nowożytna kultura umysłowa Francji*, Poznań 1983, p. 36-43; Z. Drozdowicz, *Główne nurty w nowożytnej filozofii francuskiej (od XVI do XX wieku)*, Poznań 1991, p. 26-40, 68-71.

² G. W. F. Hegel, *Wykłady z filozofii religii*, Ś. F. Nowicki (tr.), vol. 1, Warsaw 2006, p. 21.

that they still arouse scientific curiosity. No one is surprised by the philosophical reflection on religion, after all. Are the relations between literature and religion similarly attractive in terms of cognition, as well? Is it worth anything to deliberate on the issue of incorporating literature to the sphere of the scientific interests of specialists in religious studies at all? This seems obvious because such a postulate is indirectly signalled, especially in the circles of literary scholars. Particular attention should be paid to a very interesting remark by Jerzy Ficowski (1924-2006), who came to the conclusion that in-depth study of the works by Bruno Schulz (1892-1942) requires the support of a specialist in religious studies as well. The researcher deemed it necessary to also have knowledge of religious studies in order to encompass the phenomenon of the reality created by Schulz. Therefore, he assumed that the nature of the literary world of the drawing teacher from Drohobych would be better interpreted using "para-religious and psychoethnological studies than the classic methods of literary studies"³. The considerations of another well-known researcher of Schulz's work, i.e. Jerzy Jarzębski, follow a similar direction. Taking into consideration the syncretic and polysemantic character of the artist's literary output, the literary critic also allowed the possibility of its Gnostic reading. In other words, he admitted that it contained elements that may be deemed religious, para-religious, or religious and philosophical⁴. On the other hand, Wojciech Gutowski indicated an interest in Neo-Gnostic concepts, such as was present in the works of Tadeusz Miciński (1873-1918) and other Polish modernist writers⁵. Owing to his research, he ascertained that the texts by Edouard Schuré (1841-1928) and Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) were highly popular at the time. Marian Stala was another researcher to work on a similar problem. He came to the conclusion that the literature created by Polish modernists had begun to be imbued with the ontological and anthropological, as well as theoretical and cognitive concepts, which had arisen among the Neo-Gnostic religious and philosophical movements. Another astounding issue might be the popularity of teaching of this type among artists because it had been met with negative reception on the part of institutional scientific centres right from the start⁶. Let the considerations of M. Podraza-Kwiatkowska provide a peculiar culmination to the inquiries discussed above. In her research she suggests that religious fascination does not concern individual writers and poets only. In her opinion, they simply concern literature as a whole. Of course, they appear in certain specific historical and literary

³ J. Ficowski, *Exposé o "Sklepiach cynamonowych"*, in: J. Ficowski, *Regiony wielkiej herezji i okolice. Bruno Schulz i jego mitologia*, Sejny 2002, p. 167.

⁴ Cf. J. Jarzębski, *Schulz: spojrzenie przyszłość*, in: *Czytanie Schulza. Materiały międzynarodowej sesji naukowej: Bruno Schulz – w stulecie urodzin i w pięćdziesięciolecie śmierci...*, J. Jarzębski (ed.), Kraków 1994, p. 314-315; more on other aspects of Schulz's Gnosticism: cf. e.g. A. Kalin, *Księga heretycka – Schulzowski model kultury literackiej*, in: *W ulamkach zwierciadła... Bruno Schulz w 110 rocznicę urodzin i 60 rocznicę śmierci*, M. Kitowska-Lysiak, W. Panas (ed.), Lublin 2003, p. 289-319.

⁵ Cf. W. Gutowski, *W poszukiwaniu życia nowego. Mit a światopogląd w twórczości Tadeusza Micińskiego*, Warsaw – Poznań – Toruń 1980, p. 35-36; W. Gutowski, *Tadeusza Micińskiego wiara widząca*, "Gnosis", 1996, no. 9, p. 44-52.

⁶ Cf. M. Stala, *Pejzaż człowieka. Młodopolskie myśli i wyobrażenia o duszy, duchu i ciele*, Kraków 1994, p. 42-86.

moments in a particularly intensified manner. First of all, however, they constitute a proof of immanent processes taking place inside its structure⁷.

Therefore, the aim of considerations herein is not only an attempt to indicate the ways of recognising the processes in question using the apparatus of religious studies, but also an intention to consider the chance for possible support of the efforts undertaken by literary scholars. Due to the character of the sketch herein, the ascertainment contained in it only signals the existence of a more complex research project. It has been conceived as a certain reflection on the phenomenon of the reception of gnosis, Gnosticism and Neo-Gnosis in literature. Aiming at illustrating the immensity of the Gnostic infiltration of literature, it is necessary to provide examples taken from a diverse literary output.

II

First and foremost it is worth making use of the attainments of the comparative history of religion while making an attempt to explain the nature of the relation between literature and religion⁸. Owing to it, researchers have appropriate knowledge of the historical transformations and development of a given religion. Next they can confront it with the image of religion which has become established in a literary work. At this point, they may make use of their competences in literary studies and religious studies. For instance, they both allow them to verify the degree of the extensiveness of a writer's knowledge of religion portrayed in his or her work.

Let the Gnostic fascination of Stanisław Przybyszewski (1868-1927) be a peculiar illustration of this issue. It turns out that in his *Il regno doloroso* (1924) the writer makes a literary use of Valentinian gnosis⁹. Thus, the invoked text may provide knowledge on the books which Przybyszewski made use of while studying Valentinian Gnosticism. These are mainly texts written by Christian anti-Gnostic polemicists. It is even possible to find traces of works written by particular opponents of Gnosticism in *Il regno doloroso*¹⁰. However, one should not raise objections to the author on such grounds because there were very few original Gnostic texts at that time. While it is true that the *Acts of John* had already been in Berlin, they were not translated from Coptic yet. It is also acceptable to compare the literary vision of Valentinism established by Przybyszewski with the contem-

⁷ Cf. M. Podraza-Kwiatkowska, *Literatura a poznanie, czyli o wyrażaniu niewyraźnego*, in: M. Podraza-Kwiatkowska, *Wolność i transcendencja. Studia i eseje o Młodej Polsce*, Kraków 2001, p. 319-330.

⁸ Cf. A. Bronk, *Podstawy nauk o religii*, Lublin 2003, p. 40.

⁹ For more on this topic: cf. e.g. G. Matuszek, *Seksualizm i androgynizm. O erotyce w twórczości Stanisława Przybyszewskiego*, "Rocznik Kasprowiczowski", 1990, no. VII, p. 100; A. Jocz, *Przypadek "osy rozbójniczej". Rozważania o gnostycyzmie i neognozie w literaturze polskiej przełomu XIX i XX wieku*, Poznań 2009, p. 31-34, 48-66. For more on other aspects of Przybyszewski's Gnostic view of the world: cf. A. Jocz, *O potrzebie gnozy, czyli jak literacko wyrazić naturę zła – cierpienia*, in: *Gnoza, gnostycyzm, literatura*, B. Sienkiewicz, M. Dobkowski, A. Jocz (eds.), Kraków 2012, p. 97-110.

¹⁰ Cf. A. Jocz, *Przypadek...*, op. cit., p. 33-34.

porary knowledge of the evolution of that religious concept. Owing to this, one is able to observe the fact that the contents of *Il regno doloroso* contain errors in the nomenclature of Gnostic perfect beings¹¹. On the other hand, in a specially prepared *Frontispiceto* the new edition of *De profundis* (1929), the writer clearly modifies some significant elements of Valentinus' Gnosticism. He begins with simplifying (maybe as a result of ordinary ignorance) the extremely complex *aeonic* mythology. And apart from that, he blurs differences between some *Aeons*. First of all, however, he absolutises the essence of the rebellion of *Aeon Sophia*¹². However, in order to gain and fully verify information of such a type, it is necessary to have knowledge of religious studies on the historical development of Gnosticism.

At this point, of course, the problem of the point in pursuing literary activities of such a kind emerges in a justified manner. Why did Przybyszewski put so much effort into gaining knowledge of early-Christian gnosis and begin to transform its doctrinal bases? Aiming at an explanation of this kind of artistic conduct, it befits to refer to one of the basic theses of structuralist religious studies, which claimed that "religion constitutes an integral part of the social system"¹³. Seen from this point, it is acceptable to perceive Przybyszewski's activities in terms of a conscious contestation, which aimed at putting social order to a peculiar test through a rejection of the religion that co-created it, that is Christianity. This is precisely why he referred to Gnosticism, the religious teaching of which had already been considered deeply unorthodox, or even heretical, by early-Christian thinkers. The writer built Valentinian Gnosticism into his literary message, thus provoking the society of the time in such a way. Of course, his aim was not only do destroy the existing social and religious order. He put a lot of effort into his studies on the foundations of Gnosticism, after all. By using and simultaneously modifying the Valentinian gnosis, Przybyszewski attempted to construct a base for his own philosophical and religious alternative. It was his *Frontispice* where he claimed that the whole of his artistic output should be read through the prism of Gnostic conceptual categories¹⁴. In this way, he aimed at proving that the literature he pursued offered a wider metaphysical perspective. Thus, he wished to revalorise it. This is because he strove to argue that a similar intuition had already been shared by Juliusz Słowacki (1809-1849)¹⁵. Thus, he aimed at situating his own inquiries in the vicinity of the intellectual and literary output of the author of *Kordian*, who used to be an unchallenged authority in the modernist artistic environment of the time.

¹¹ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 32-33.

¹² Cf. *ibidem*, p. 48-55.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 56.

¹⁴ Cf. S. Przybyszewski, *Frontispice*, in: S. Przybyszewski, *De profundis*, Lwów – Warszawa – Bydgoszcz – Poznań – Kraków – Lublin 1929, p. 2.

¹⁵ For more on this topic: cf. S. Przybyszewski, *Ekspresjonizm – Słowacki i "Genezis z Ducha"*, "Zdrój", 1918, issue 1, p. 5-7; issue 2, p. 36-39; issue 3, p. 66-68; issue 4, p. 99-101; issue 5, p. 132-134; issue 6, p. 164-169; A. Jocz, *O wychowawczej roli filozofii wobec literatury. Stanisława Przybyszewskiego odczytanie istoty Boga na podstawie "Genezis z Ducha"*, in: *Polskie ethos i logos*, J. Skoczyński (ed.), Kraków 2008, p. 39-44.

III

On the other hand, a search for connections between literature and religion in Bruno Schulz's works requires a different research method. Of course, the already mentioned suggestions made by Ficowski and Jarzębski may constitute a certain hint. On the other hand, however, it also befits to remember about Artur Sandauer's (1913-1989) doubts, for he claimed that the writer was not a religious person¹⁶. Notwithstanding this, these considerations do not aim at any settlements in the matter of the institutional dimension of Schulz's religiousness. His equivocal relations with religious orthodoxy can be evidenced by, e.g. his withdrawal from the Jewish commune. In no way did he do it out of some spiritual inspirations, but as a result of his matrimonial plans¹⁷. Similarly, the literature he cultivated contains no such direct attempts to make use of religious themes, as was the case with Przybyszewski. It is difficult to point out a single, clear declaration in Schulz's works, one that would resemble that made by the author of *Confiteor* on the topic of his Gnostic interests. However, it is possible to find many suggestions, hints, and sometimes only blurred traces, which form a complex labyrinth of religious threads¹⁸. Of course, one of them will be the philosophical and religious concepts that result from the Judaic background of Schulz's work in an organic way. Their meaning is very strongly accentuated by Shalom Lindenbaum, among other researchers¹⁹. Their presence is also acknowledged by Jerzy Jarzębski, who invokes the considerations of Władysław Panas (1947-2005) on this occasion²⁰. Jarzębski himself, however, seems to accept the critics' argument that "Schulz' power lies precisely in the variety of traditions which he made references to, among which Judaism constitutes only one – however very important – fragment"²¹. It is precisely among these varied traditions that it is worth searching for the traces of Gnostic and Neo-Gnostic thinking.

Owing to the comparative history of religion, it is possible to identify the main Gnostic, as well as Neo-Gnostic conceptual categories and ascertain that the majority of them attempt to grasp and describe the phenomenon of matter/materiality. On the other hand, this was as early as at the time of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (1885-1939), who formulated a conviction that shows that Schulz treated matter with the utmost attention²². Thus, it is worth accepting the intellectual challenge and to compare Schulz's literary visualisations of matter with Gnostic representations. Of course, activities of this kind

¹⁶ Cf. J. Ficowski, *Nawracanie na cudzą wiarę*, in: J. Ficowski, *Regiony...*, op. cit., p. 153.

¹⁷ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 152.

¹⁸ On the motif of labyrinth in Schulz: cf. J. Jarzębski, *Czasoprzestrzeń mitu i marzenia w prozie Brunona Schulza*, in: J. Jarzębski, *Powieść jako autokreacja*, Kraków – Wrocław 1984, p. 192-195.

¹⁹ Cf. S. Lindenbaum, *Wizja mesjanistyczna Schulza i jej podłoże mistyczne*, in: *Czytanie Schulza...*, op. cit., p. 33-67; S. Lindenbaum, „Sanatorium pod Klepsydrą” – Hades czy sanatorium?, in: *W ulamkach zwierciadła...*, op. cit., p. 47-73.

²⁰ Cf. J. Jarzębski, *Schulz*, Wrocław 1999, p. 119.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² Cf. S. I. Witkiewicz, *Twórczość literacka Brunona Schulza*, in: S. I. Witkiewicz, *O znaczeniu filozofii dla krytyki i inne artykuły polemiczne*, Warsaw 1976, p. 195.

cannot be accused of ahistoricism because Gnostic conceptualism has already been functioning in a reality created by Przybyszewski and they naturally had to permeate to the wide Polish literary awareness. It was similar with the issue of Neo-Gnosis, the popularity of which has already been signalled in this sketch.

The result of the research mentioned above is the discovery that in some regions of Schulz's world there is Gnostic carefulness, or even distrust at times, and in extreme cases even unequivocal dislike with regard to matter and materiality²³. It is best to begin explaining the essence of this suggestion with the following fragment, which comes from the work entitled *Traktat o manekinach albo Wtóra Księga Rodzaju*: "The whole matter waves with infinite possibilities, which pass through it with bland shivers. Waiting for the invigorating breath of the spirit, it keeps pouring itself over endlessly, tempts with a thousand sweet rounds and softness, which it looms out of itself in blind delusion. (...) Matter is the most passive and vulnerable being in the universe. (...) All organisations of matter are unstable and loose, and thus easy to retard and solve"²⁴.

Thus, the writer designed a reality in which matter does not provide a human with a guarantee of a sense of elementary security and stabilisation. However, what surprises the reader in the invoked text is first of all a peculiar omnipotence of matter, as well as its changing, unstableness and whimsicality²⁵. They may not be unequivocally Gnostic conceptual categories, but this is the way in which the creator shapes the already mentioned Gnostic distrust with regard to sensuality. If it turns out that all material beings aim primarily at decoupling, a human cannot rest assured of a permanent and stable character of their own existence. Thus, they cannot retain the sense of existentialist self-confidence. It also befits to notice that there are some notions which the writer uses in order to grasp the phenomenon of matter in a way that astoundingly resemble the Neo-Gnostic way of seeing the world. The point is mainly the issue of the possibility of exerting spiritual influence on matter, in order to overcome its "passivity". It seems to result from the further part of the fragment quoted herein that the spiritual influence on matter is first of all of a shape-creating character. In the reality constructed by Schulz, it manifests itself, e.g. through the stimulation of the growth of quasi-floral and quasi-beastly forms/beings that emanate from the substance of old forgotten residential rooms²⁶.

²³ For more on the Gnostic perception of matter in Schulz: cf. e.g. A. Jocz, *Bruno Schulz a gnostycyzm*, „Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne”, 1996, Seria Literacka, vol. 3, p. 165-172; A. Jocz, *Bruno Schulz, czyli o gnostycznej pokusie literatury*, in: *W ulamkach zwierniada...*, op. cit., p. 275-288; A. Jocz, *Bruno Schulz, czyli o gnostycznej próbie uchwycenia fenomenu cierpienia*, „Przegląd Religioznawczy”, 2006, no. 1 (219), p. 47-58; A. Jocz, *Literacka percepcja doświadczenia hermeneutycznego*, in: *Hermeneutyka i literatura – ku nowej koiné*, K. Kuczyńska-Koschany, M. Januszkiewicz (eds.), Poznań 2006, p. 53-62.

²⁴ B. Schulz, *Traktat o manekinach albo Wtóra Księga Rodzaju*, in: B. Schulz, *Opowiadania. Wybór esejów i listów*, BN, Series I, no. 264, Wrocław – Warszawa – Kraków – Gdańsk – Łódź 1989, p. 33.

²⁵ More on this topic: cf. A. Jocz, *Bruno Schulz, czyli o nieznosnym obcowaniu z nieupostaciowaną materią*, in: B. Sienkiewicz, T. Sobieraj, *Literackość filozofii – filozoficzność literatury*, Warsaw 2009, p. 157-167.

²⁶ Cf. B. Schulz, *Traktat o manekinach. Dokończenie*, in: B. Schulz, *Opowiadania...*, op. cit., p. 41.

On the other hand, while searching through Schulz's texts for that one unequivocal dislike with regard to materiality, it is worth noticing that by means of his literature, he warns about excessive attachment to the sensual/bodily existence. For it is that existence which in an outright, unusual way seems to be susceptible to numerous defects and this is why it is simply impermanent. This kind of indisposition very often becomes source of immense human suffering experienced by the characters created by Schulz. Țuȃa, a physically degenerated beggar, Dodo, a mentally retarded person, and Edzio, who struggles with underdevelopment of his lower limbs – they are all marked by sensual and psychic pain²⁷.

Of course, Brunon Schulz is a more perfect and subtle creator than Przybyszewski in terms of art, but he also seems to resort to religious conceptual categories (e.g. Gnostic and Neo-Gnostic ones) because it aims at deepening the literary world in terms of its meaning. Sometimes one might get an impression that Schulz is in search of a certain metaphysical alternative, whereas at other times his artistic beings/creations seem to constitute an aesthetically beautiful value in themselves. Thus, in the case of both creators, religion becomes the material (one of many), from which they create their work.

²⁷ Cf. B. Schulz, *Sierpień*, in: B. Schulz, *Opowiadania...*, op. cit., p. 8; B. Schulz, *Dodo*, in: B. Schulz, *Opowiadania...*, op. cit., p. 278, 284; B. Schulz, *Edzio*, in: B. Schulz, *Opowiadania...*, op. cit., p. 286.