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The Relation Between the Spiritual and the Aesthetic in the Poetry of Daniel Pastirčák

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The Relation between the Spiritual and the Aesthetic in the Poetry of Daniel Pastirčák

In the beginning of the study we go back to the times of Great Moravia to highlight the first spiritual poem in Old Church Slavonic *Proglas* that has set a tradition of poetry written by priests in Slovak literature. A short outline of the most significant authors up to present times is also given.

After the introduction of Daniel Pastirčák's versatile personality, we focus on his poetical works characterised by an overt accent on spiritual matters. We confirm an uneasy task of a poet to convey his personal, unique and virtually untransferable experience by means of verse.

The core of the study lies in our attempt to go into Pastirčák's four books of poems in order to find constituent elements of his poetry illustrating them with examples from his collections.

Finally, we show Pastirčák among other spiritually-oriented poets of the middle-aged generation in contemporary Slovak poetry.

The tradition of the personal union of a poet and a priest, belonging to various denominations, has been present in Slovak literature since the times of Great Moravia and the first original Old Church Slavonic spiritual work – *Proglas* by St. Cyril (Constantine the Philosopher), the foreword to his translation of the four Gospels. The whole range of authors who have carried this legacy up to the present times includes the Renaissance poets Ján Silván, Eliáš Láni, Daniel Pribiš and Juraj Tranovský, followed by Daniel Sinapius-Horčička and Samuel Hruškovic in the Baroque period. The end of the 18th century opened the process of the National Enlightenment with the classicist poets like Ján Hollý, Ján Kollár and Bohuslav Tablic, or later Romantics Andrej Sládkovič and Samo Chalupka. In the late 19th century the realistic generation with poets like Koloman Banšell or Andrej Trúchly-Sytniansky emerged. The modernist poets of the early 20th century include priests, like: Vladimír Roy and Martin Rázus, Emil Boleslav Lukáč and Martin Braxatoris-Sládkovičov later in the inter-war period. At that time a strong group of poets called Catholic Modernism (Rudolf Dilong, Janko Silan, Pavol

Ušák Oliva, Gorazd Zvonický, Mikuláš Šprinc, Ján Haranta, Svetoslav Veigl) inspired by the European avant-garde, was formed. With the Communist coup in 1948 and the subsequent establishment of totalitarian regime, some of them had to leave the country, while others retreated to the inner emigration. The following 40-year period was rather hostile to the spiritual poetry and only a handful of former or active priests like Milan Kraus or Ladislav Fričovský chose poetry as the way of self-expression.

Perhaps the most significant figure of the contemporary Slovak poetry, incorporating both theological and aesthetic (not only literary) dimension, is Daniel Pastirčák (b. 1959), a preacher of the Brethren Church, a poet, writer, essayist, scriptwriter, translator and visual artist, one of the most active religious persons in the Slovak public life.

His first book of verse *Tehilim* was published in 1997 and followed by the collection *Kristus v Bruseli* (Christ in Brussels) in 2005 and *V* in 2012. In the same year he came with his innovative interpretation of *Proglas* under the title *Slovo pred slovom. Proglas pre deti a ich rodičov* (“The word before the word. Proglas for Children and Their Parents”). His appearance in literature, though, dates back to 1993 when the collection of meditative fairy tales *Damianova rieka* (“Damian’s River”) appeared, later in 1996 awarded the IBBY (The International Prize for the Best Book for the Young). In 2001 he published another book for children *Čintet*, followed by *Rozprávky z lepšieho sveta* (“Fairy-Tales from the Better World”) in 2008. The selection of his reflections *Kázne. Zdravé telo v kóme* (“Sermons. A Healthy Body in a Coma”) and the book of myths called *Minimýty* (“Minimyths”) both were issued in 2011.

From the point of view of the literary communication, the spiritual poetry that our cultural context mainly identifies with the Christian poetry, rendering personal relation to God, has some special features that have already been pointed out by the literary scholars. Marián Milčák, a theorist and an author of the spiritual poetry, claims: “Both the author and his reader should understand spirituality as a natural part of the text’s artistic ambitions rather than the dominant aim. A complex and non-linear process of shaping and differentiation that precedes every artistically valuable statement cannot be replaced with pathos, pure exaltation or just soulful profession of faith. Although it is true that a poem can be a prayer, it does not mean that every prayer becomes a poem automatically... An ecstatic experience of a mystic or every similar unrepeatable and specifically private religious experience that need not correspond to any other situation cannot be rendered by way of language or is near the

limits of communicability”¹. Reviewing Pastirčák’s first book of verse *Tehilim*, Peter Macsovszky² also touched upon the question of communicability of “an authentic spiritual experience” and its adequate transformation into a poem. A poet, thus, oscillates between the uniqueness and intimate character of his personal experience and universally valid values. That is, he has to aim for the poem not to become only a direct manifestation of religion and for his relation to transcend so much that it cannot be verbalised in essence, like most of the deepest human emotions, but to be open to his prospective readers. In addition, a poet-priest has to take into account that a sermon with the primary collective reception differs from a poem which reception takes place individually, silently and recurrently.

As a poet, Daniel Pastirčák is obviously aware of these pitfalls. He is not trying to impose his faith on a reader, but rather invites him to take part in a journey along a path “without the exactly known direction”³. He reveals his tendency towards the Hebrew-Christian tradition by the very title of his debut *Tehilim* (“Songs of Psalms”) and the titles of its parts are: *Šire rekochim* (“Songs of Distance”), *Šire al mut* (“Songs of Death”), *Šire ha maalot* (“Songs of Pilgrims”) and *Šire tefilim* (“Songs of Prayers”). The book contains many biblical quotations which function like allusions and the Bible is also referred to by the diction of his poems and predominant archetypal motifs like: garden, sea, cross, wind, snake and lamb... Moreover, a dynamic motif of movement prevails in the book either in its factual or allegorical meaning: “What has sense is just the way home. / That is, we proceed / to come back”⁴; “If I leave (I will close / the gate / behind me) / I am // Forever going out // to You”⁵.

Since the genre of parable, as Marián Milčák pointed out, “in a poem retains its semantic and to a certain extent also expressional autonomy thank to its nature”⁶, offering the author a little smaller handling area (the reader awaits allusiveness towards the Bible, thus the teleology of the poem is given), the author has to select his means of expression in such a manner so that in the end the text would be not only the manifestation of faith, but primarily a sovereign poetic statement.

¹ M.Milčák, *Mýtus a báseň. (Sedem úvah o poézii)*, Modrý Peter, Levoča 2010, p. 35–36.

² P.Macsovszky, *Kýdel’ lietajúcich básní*, „RAK“, 3: 1998, nr. 1–2, p. 122.

³ D.Pastirčák, *Tehilim*, Modrý Peter, Levoča 1997, p. 49. [All translations of poems and their extracts into English were made by the author of the study solely for its purpose. It’s already been mentioned].

⁴ Idem, *Tehilim*, op. cit., p. 14.

⁵ Idem, *Tehilim*, op. cit., p. 104.

⁶ M.Milčák, *Mýtus a báseň...*, op.cit., p. 41.

One of the distinctive characteristics of Pastirčák's poems in *Tehilim* is their gnomic character indicated by various features:

- In the very first poem the author introduces a character of an old man situated on the desert and the sea, who obviously conveys symbolic value. Later in the book he is followed by a man (either as a parable of Christ or in a general sense of human being) or a rider.
- Quite frequently, metaphors of definition occur: "The earth is a place of death. // And death is a gate, / if you are leaving / called by Love"⁷; "Solitude / is / Me / and things / and relations / to things"⁸; "Man: He resembles universe most"⁹; "The bed is a boat sailing across time"¹⁰.
- The speaker's voice even intimates love experience is depicted as a way to the deeper spiritual one as can be seen in "The Sacrament of Marriage", the only part of the book, which does not carry a Hebrew title and consists of the cycle of three poems drawing their names from the archetypal elements ("The Fire Ring", "The Wind", "The Sea").

The poems refer both to the beginning of the world by paraphrasing the Book of Genesis ("... darkness over the deep, / the Spirit over the waters"¹¹) and to its end by indicating eschatological motifs ("The past, the future in the only moment of the cross"¹²). This movement is not linear but cyclic (from the transcendence to the immanence and back to the transcendence) and communication leads from the horizontal to the vertical. The end implies the beginning and "the earth united with the heavens in this dance"¹³. Earthly, carnal love gains mystical dimensions emphasized by the paraphrase of Christ's words: "And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one"¹⁴.

⁷ D. Pastirčák, *Tehilim*, op. cit., p. 12.

⁸ Idem, *Tehilim*, op. cit., p. 13.

⁹ Idem, *Tehilim*, op. cit., p. 23.

¹⁰ Idem, *Tehilim*, op. cit., p. 107.

¹¹ Idem, *Tehilim*, op. cit., p. 76.

¹² Idem, *Tehilim*, op. cit., p. 83.

¹³ Idem, *Tehilim*, op. cit., p. 90.

¹⁴ *The Holy Bible. King James Version*, (John 17; 22), <http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org> [available 10. 01. 2013].

Still, what looms over an author of philosophical or spiritual poetry – and Daniel Pastirčák is no exception – is a temptation to overuse abstract entities. More convincing are those texts which contain “a real human experience with faith, not just its adoration”¹⁵.

Another possible way to resist this temptation is to make the abstract a part of an original metaphor (“Saddle me up with truth / under the harness of love / My desirous being is trembling”¹⁶, or as the case may be, to combine it with the economy of expression:

Vtáci

Duša má krdeľ lietajúcich očí
Chvíľu blízko, chvíľu ďaleko,
klesajú a dvíhajú sa
k Jedinému oku,
modrému nad obzorom.

Niet nič stáleho v ich vratkých krídlach

a duša vždy túžila po stálosti.

Hlboko v zrenici
Modrého oka
okrídlenci našli miesto na hniezdenie.

Tu je pohyb stálosťou
a tanec nehybnosťou vo Večnom Svetle.

[Daniel Pastirčák, *Tehilim*, Modrý Peter, Levoča 1997, s. 28]

In my loose translation:

Birds

The soul has a flock of flying eyes.
Close for a while, distant for a while,
they descend and rise
to the Only eye,
blue over the horizon.

There is nothing stable in their wobbly wings

and the soul has always longed for stability.

¹⁵ J.Gavura, *Lyrické iluminácie (kritiky a interpretácie 1997 – 2010)*, Slniečkovo, Prešov 2012, p. 24.

¹⁶ D.Pastirčák, *Tehilim*, op. cit., p. 95.

Deep in the pupil
of the Blue eye
the winged ones found a nesting place.

Here, the movement is stability
and the dance is stillness in the Eternal Light¹⁷.

[the text translated into English by Marián Andričík]

As a visual artist Pastirčák not only illustrates all his collections by himself, but also makes references or allusions to particular paintings of Joan Miró, Alberto Giacometti or Marc Chagall. The famous James Ensor's painting *Christ's Entry into Brussels* even inspired him for the title of his second collection. The painting itself can be seen here in the form of its black-and-white reversed postmodern palimpsest with inlaid drawings of faces, some of which markedly remind the reader of the contemporary Slovak politicians. The material world enters into the poems more vigorously than in the debut book, making the anticipation of an ideal stronger. Pastirčák uses various non-fiction elements such as newspaper titles ("The Portrait of the River") or parts of scholarly discourse ("The Portrait of the Head"). This also brings a wider range of modes and approaches – from the exalted one predominant in *Tehilim* to the ironic or satirical. This is most visible in the poem "The Portrait of the Image" denouncing hedonism of the present-day life, the cult of the good-looking that glorifies surface and shallow beauty. The speaker ironically calls for everything to be "sexy", using gradation from face to disease even to death: "Let everyone get a neat coffin in time. / With charming curves, with seductive bends. / Let your coffin and your wreath be sexy. / The dead one that is not sexy cannot be buried"¹⁸. This poem proves that spiritual values can be highlighted not only by an exalted declaration, but also in an inverse way – by pointing out emptiness in their absence. After all, this principle of indirect approach to an object holds true for every good, not just spiritual poetry.

The book is divided into two sections named *Portraits* and *Icons* with the poems of respective titles "The Portrait of..." and „The Icon of..." except the last poem of the first section holding the same title as the book. It is not easy to find a key of interpretation to this division and to draw a strict dividing line between them. According to Ľubomír Feldek, the author himself "interprets it as a sort of verbal cross. 'Icons' represent

¹⁷ Idem, *Tehilim*, op. cit., p. 28.

¹⁸ D. Pastirčák, *Kristus v Bruseli*, Ex Tempore, Bratislava 2005, p. 22.

the horizontal limb, being/coming from this world, in which simplification, fallibility or ruin impend over us, whereas the 'portrait' symbolises a vertical, unique human soul heading for immortality"¹⁹. Let us suggest another, alternative approach to this composition. The difference between portraits and icons perhaps could be seen rather in the way of representation than in the object itself. While a portrait evokes a mimetic, realistic depiction, an icon (in the meaning of an image of Jesus or a holy person) refers to symbolic principle with liturgical connotations. In this sense, the limbs of this verbal cross could be interchanged.

Like in the debut book, Pastirčák utilises archetypal motifs of garden, way, river, sea and others, accenting their spiritual dimension. This seems to be marked more in *The Icons*, like in the end of the poem "The Icon of the Sea": "On the top of the wave / I get lost, I fall, / finally / drowned / in you"²⁰. Here, the human experience with the archetypal motif of sea gains deeper (and yet higher, at the same time transcendental) meaning. Similarly, he uses allegory to the same purpose:

Ikona vlaku

Zrodení
bez lístka, bez preukazu,
pod staničnými hodinami,
na prázdnom nástupišti čakajú
polnočný rýchlik domov.

Nastupuje každý sám,
odchádzajú spolu.
Kufre nechali na peróne
bezdodomcom.

[Daniel Pastirčák, *Kristus v Bruseli*, Ex Tempore, Bratislava 2005, p. 101]

In my loose translation:

The Icon of the Train

Born
without a ticket, without a card,
under the station clock,
on an empty platform, I'm awaited
by a midnight train home.

Everyone gets on alone,
they depart together.

¹⁹ Ľ.Feldek, *Kristus prichádza do Bruselu*, „SME“, 12: 2005, nr 296,
<http://www.sme.sk/c/2521795/kristus-prichadza-do-bruselu.html> [available 10. 01. 2013].

²⁰ D. Pastirčák, *Kristus...*, op. cit., p. 98.

They've left their suitcases on the platform
for the homeless²¹.

[the text translated into English by Marián Andričík]

The journey home by train delicately refers to the Gospel and Christ's words: "go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me" (Mt 19:21). However, compared to the first book, this collection has less mystical and more civil character incorporating many elements from contemporary life.

Pastirčák builds some of his poems on the skeleton of the previous ones from *Tehlim*, as though re-writing them in a palimpsestic way. The above quoted poem "Birds" has its counterpart in "The Icon of the Soul" that revolves around the same motifs of the soul, eyes, birds or stillness.

From the prosodic point of view both collections are characteristic of the predominant use of free verse, however, the second one shows some tendency towards the regular rhythm with more frequent rhymes including internal ones. As if music entered into the poems both in its theme and structure. Although it would not be appropriate to speak about the regular metrical schemes, the iambic or trochaic inclination of particular lines is obvious. We can even find a rarely used kind of rhyme that could be called an implicit rhyme since only one member of the couple is present, while the second one is evoked by it and by the overall theme of the poem. "The Icon of the Garden" ends with the following lines: "Po toľkých rokoch znova v tvojej záhrade. / Pozri, ochutnávam to jablko / a ty mi stekáš po brade, nekonečný, / v každom póre prebudenej kože" ("I am in your garden after so many years. / Look, I taste your apple / and you flow down my face, endless, / in every pore of my awakened skin"²²). The final word "kože" implies an apostrophe "bože" („God“). This rhyme materialises itself in Pastirčák's third book of verse *V* in a short untitled poem: „stvoril si ma / z nekonečna / a zvieracej kože // tvorením / si sa zrodil / som matka tvoja / aj tvoje dieťa bože“ ("you created me / out of infinity / and animal skin // by creation / you were born / I am your mother / and your child, God"²³).

The third Pastirčák's collection is more concise, compact, consisting of a cycle of poems, that were written as the foreword says, on the

²¹ Idem, *Kristus...*, op. cit., p. 101.

²² D.Pastirčák, *Kristus...*, op. cit., p. 91. Loose translation, not preserving rhyming scheme.

²³ D.Pastirčák, *V*, Artforum, Bratislava 2012, p. 56.

Levoča Hill, a place of pilgrimage in Eastern Slovakia. It contains philosophical-meditative poetry emphasizing the unity of the world, of man and nature, of earthly and divine. It is related to his cyclic conception of time where events are recurring united by love as a general principle. Here, “human dualism, dimensions of temporal (with his body) and eternal (with his soul) man”²⁴ from the first book gets more universal form in dual categories of the past and present, the beginning and the end, birth and death, human and divine.

Out of all three books, here the preacher’s side of Pastirčák’s personality is perhaps most visible. The poems are close to prayers and their literary character partly revives the mysticism of his first book. The balance between poetry and theology seems to be disturbed in favour of the latter. The vector of the speaker’s communication, however, is not solely directed to transcendence. The outer world enters the poem in what we may call the phenomenology of cognition when the speaker tries to discard his previous knowledge about its constituents trying to see them with new eyes: “oh grass / I renounce everything / I have known about you // I renounce you / teachers, botanists, gardeners // oh grass / I renounce everything I have known / everything I knew // oh grass / let me see you again”²⁵. One of the most frequent motifs is the one of creation in various senses, poiesis that gives sense to one’s existence and forms it: “to deliver and to accept / the rest is history / we create each other / in them / out of nothing”²⁶.

While the previous book *Christ in Brussels* ends with the peaceful image of God who comes home content with his Creation, “looking at his small flickering universe / that has just matured and smells sweet” (“The Icon of Home”), this one results in a disturbing and warning picture of the end of the world that could come with the end of thinking and virtual victory of matter over spirit:

myseľ sa vnorila do hmoty
rozprskla sa
na hadróny a kvarky

zhasla

hmota prestala
vedieť že je
a svet zanikol
sám v sebe

²⁴ J.Gavura, *Lyrické iluminácie (kritiky a interpretácie 1997–2010)*, Slniečkovo, Prešov 2012, p. 23.

²⁵ D.Pastirčák, *V*, op. cit., p. 11.

²⁶ Idem, *V*, op. cit., p. 44.

[Daniel Pastirčák, *V*, Artforum, Bratislava 2012, p. 52]

In my loose translation:

the mind immersed into matter
shattering into hadrons and quarks

it went out

matter ceased
to know it is
and the world
came to an end
in itself²⁷

[the text translated into English by Marián Andričík]

There is one special feature to this book concerning its reception. The reader is prompted to read it supported with drone-like ambient music by Pjoni (the stage name of Pastirčák's son Jonatán) that is located at the website of the publisher (www.artforum.sk). Accompanied by this music, the poems had been presented on various public readings before they were published in the book, thus contributing to rather modest tradition of public presentation of poetry in Slovakia.

In the beginning of this study we associated the history of (not only) spiritual poetry on our territory with Saint Cyril's *Proglas*. This ancient poem also inspired Pastirčák for his most recent project called *The word before the word (Proglas for Children and Their Parents)*. The motifs of the word and the language have already been accented in his previous books of verse suggesting its limited capability of expressing the world, especially what exceeds our experience ("I myself / express only a drop"²⁸). This poetic interpretation of *Proglas* can be seen as a reminder of its cultural and spiritual legacy. The word carries ontological (its participation in the Creation referring to the biblical "In the beginning was the word" (John 1:1), noetic (an instrument of cognition) and ethical (a weapon against evil) dimensions. More straightforward style of the poem is related to the character of its potential recipient. In an effort to mediate children the message of *Proglas*, Pastirčák resorts to allegory with the use of fairytale characters like a knight or a dragon. As in his previous collection, he also emphasizes the principle of immanence, God's presence in this world ("In the mirror of God I recognize

²⁷ *Idem*, *V*, op. cit., p. 52.

²⁸ *Idem*, *V*, op. cit., p. 20.

my face”²⁹. Formally, he preserves a twelve-syllable line of *Proglas* but unlike the unrhymed original, he joins lines together into couplets with plain rhyme. With their loose trochaic rhythm, they partly remind of the Alexandrine line used by Slovak Romantic poets like Ján Botto or Janko Kráľ, although not divided by dieresis.

In today’s world, marked by secularism and indifference to poetry of the majority of people, Daniel Pastirčák is a true apostle of faith and the poetic word. A preacher himself, he is aware of the strength of the Gospel and naturally puts it in the centre of his poetic vision. At the same time he knows it takes a lot of discipline to convey one’s personal spiritual experience to others by means of verse. Sometimes he is criticised for his too gnomic or abstract style influenced by his profession, offering readers instant truth rather than a quest for it, however, his best poems prove his ability to combine deep message with original imagery that is most effective in tight pieces drawing from a particular human experience. Together with other philosophically and spiritually-oriented poets of his generation like Erik Groch, Róbert Bielik, Rudolf Jurolek or Marián Milčák, he helps to overcome the spiritual void that is either a result of legacy of the previous totalitarian regime or it stems from the existential uncertainty of the present-day world.

The Title in English:

The Relation Between the Spiritual and the Aesthetic in the Poetry of Daniel Pastirčák

Abstract (Summary):

The aim of the study is to present the poetry of Daniel Pastirčák, one of the most prominent spiritual poets in the contemporary Slovak literature. Through interpretation of his four book of verse, we attempt to name dominant features of his poetry. A thread of spiritual poetry can be seen since Old Slavonic literature, particularly St. Cyril’s foreword to his translation of the Gospels called *Proglas*. Since then, every period of literary history had active priests engaged in writing poetry, and a short survey of most important names is given in this study. We tackle general

²⁹ D. Pastirčák, *Slovo pred slovom. Proglas pre deti a ich rodičov*, Literárne informačné centrum, Bratislava 2012, p. 6.

problems of writing spiritual poetry, especially the tension between its theological and poetic aspect. A good way to overcome this threatening imbalance is either the use of original imagery or particular human experience with faith as is shown in Pastirčák's best poems. His philosophical and meditative poetry emphasizes the unity of the world, of man and nature, of earthly and divine. The speaker can see dualism in both: man and the world, combining it with the cyclical conception of time. He proves what is typical of good poetry and literature entirely: that they are able to point to spiritual values indirectly not only by their invocation. The Christian character of Pastirčák's poetry is supported by his frequent references to the Bible, either direct quotations or paraphrases, or allusions. The diction of many of his poems, mainly in his first book of verse *Tehilim*, is biblical, too. We try to support our conclusions with quotations of particular poems or their extracts in English translation. The overall ambition of this study is the attempt to offer a relatively complex view upon Daniel Pastirčák as a poet, which, we hope, will contribute to the reception of spiritual poetry in Slovak literature.

Key words:

spiritual poetry, mysticism, allegory, Gospel, reception

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Marián Andričík (ur. 1964), Doc. PhDr., Ph.D., doc. dr, studiował filologię słowacką oraz filologię angielską na Wydziale Filozoficznym Uniwersytetu im. Jana Amosa Komeńskiego w Bratysławie. Pracuje na Wydziale Filozoficznym w Uniwersytecie Pawła Józefa Szafarika w Koszycach [Univerzita Pavla Jozefa Šafárika, Filozofická fakulta] na Słowacji jako docent, ucząc teorii literatury, literatury powszechnej i teorii przekładu literackiego. Obecnie pełni funkcję kierownika Zakładu Słowacystyki, Filologii Słowiańskich i Komunikacji. Opublikował jeden tom poezji i monografię zatytułowaną *To the Poetics of Artistic Translation [O poetyce przekładu literackiego]*. Na bieżąco okazjonalnie pisze poezję dla dzieci. Wśród jego przekładów z angielskiego są dwie antologie poezji bitników oraz wybory z dzieł poetyckich Johna Keatsa, Williama Blake'a, Haydena Carrutha, Billy'ego Childish'a i Dannie Abse, natomiast tłumaczenia prozy obejmują dwa opowiadania Arthura Conan Doyle'a, pięć książek dla dzieci autorstwa Teda Hughesa i opowiadanie *Tracy's Tiger* Williama Saroyana.

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[the text translated into Polish by Marek Mariusz Tytko]