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GRADIATION OF RELIGIOUS CONSCIOUSNESS IN AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL TETRALOGY BY BORIS ZAITSEV

Key words: *autobiography, tetralogy, religion, religious consciousness, religious rebirth*

Gleb's Journey is unquestionably described by the literary critique as the most important work of Boris Zaitsev written during the time of his emigrant's artistic works. The writer spent twenty years to write this composition. The piece was defined by the author himself as a novel, chronicle, poem which consists of four autonomic parts: *Polaris* (1937), *Silence* (1948), *Youth* (1950), *Tree of Life* (1952) in which the main idea is to present a religious transformation of a hero within forty years of his life- from the late eighties of the 19th century till the mid thirties of the 20th century. For Zaitsev his religious rebirth is connected not only with return to the period of his childhood, youth but most of all to the religious roots of Russia.

The choice of the literary genre was not new because autobiography is one of the main features of Russian literature of the 20th century together with its character of a confession and aiming at self-cognition¹. Autobiography is understood as a retrospective prose where the real person presents his lots in the aspect of one person and concentrates particularly on the history of personality². The author can also recall his own experiences and present them as his own. Once, the deeply ingrained in presence autobiography can search for the moments from the past which are lived through by the author again³.

For Zaitsev the autobiography is something more. The author not only overcomes the anxiety connected with his existence here but persistently looks for his own destiny, sense of existence. The autobiography is a mirror which reflects the picture of a man and at the same time it is a reflection in the mirror from which – the need of examination of conscience emanates. Zaitsev tries to do the examination of conscience through confessions (definition by R. Lubas-Bartoszyńska) in which the author criti-

¹ Э. Абуталиева, *Содержательные и структурные доминанты автобиографического романа в русском зарубежье 20-50-х годов XX века*, [в]: *Русский роман XX века. Духовный мир и поэтика жанра. Сборник научных трудов* под. ред. А. Ванюкова, Саратов 2001, с. 78.

² P. Lejeune, *Pakt autobiograficzny*, [w:] K. Dybciak, *Teksty*, Warszawa 1975, s. 31.

³ M. Beaujour, *Autobiografia i autoportret*, przeł. K. Falicka, „Pamiętnik Literacki” 1979, z. 1, s. 317-336.

cally puts himself in the faces of other people and the world of values⁴. The autobiography is for the author of *Gleb's Journey* a process of creating himself as a man of overcoming his own weaknesses, the process of maturation to live in faith and finally the process leading to a complete change of his life in the light of God. The writer achieved new religious life through reference to the roots of his own nation, the Orthodox religion, culture in its broad sense, studying the history of his own nation and traditions.

Reminiscences enable the author to perceive the possibilities of earlier recognition of God which were omitted previously and to follow him. Finding the meaning of life, which in the case of the writer is the Orthodoxy, is constantly associated by Zaitsev with the picture of Russia- a believer. The writer finds out this picture already in his childhood but as an adult and a grown up person can understand and interpret it. Faith is associated by the writer- narrator of *Gleb's Journey* with festivals celebrated in the Orthodox Church, with the Optina, Hermitage near Kozielsk, with the Optina Elders, with Saint Seraphim of Sarov, Sergius of Radonezh, John of Kronstadt and many other people and at least with places and objects, full with symbols of Orthodox faith.

Zaitsev in his reminiscences refers to a journey as an existential experience⁵. The journey of the writer is the journey of an individual. The aspect of experiences described in the novel was also suggested in the choice of the traveller's name. The name Gleb refers to the duke Vladimir's son's biography. Gleb's travelling has an impact of Zaitsev's autobiography. The latemotif of *Gleb's Journey* is the way which according to I. Iskrzshytska is:

Sense-centre of searching and goals. The real, epic time of the novel and its space take Gleb from the presence to the future and the personal time, lyrical and the author's space aim at the saint <before>, happy <there>⁶.

The way for Zaitsev as well as for Gogol is a symbol of Russia and the writer's fate. It is also the beginning of the joys of wonderer with which his life was blessed.

The main point of Zaitsev's autobiography boils down to a complicated, constant and active perception and reading sense of existence. This sense is also hidden in the process of acquiring God's grace and joining the Orthodox Church. That is why the tetralogy is a diary, a kind of a summary of the writer's own way aiming at the recognition of God. Zaitsev presents the power of self-development of an individual understood as an obligation- the task of an eternal movement, a pilgrimage, the way to the top of spirit. In this way the author does a confession of the way he had to go through in order to become a real believer. This process was very long and required great power and motivation. Humility towards the fate and trust in his own beliefs which were present in the hero's childhood are a good choice of the way of life and spirit, and values such as humility, simplicity and nobility are the credo of *Gleb's Journey*⁷.

The colour of Zaitsev's country of childhood is an essential part of searching for faith. At the beginning this searching were unconscious and done gropingly, to become at the end clear and take a form of religious searching. This religious search made the writer think about the roots of his nation.

⁴ R. Lubas-Bartoszyńska, *Między autobiografią a literaturą*, Warszawa 1993, s. 19.

⁵ See: H. Zaworska, *Sztuka podróżowania*, Kraków 1980, s. 25.

⁶ И. Искржицкая, *Пантеистическое одеяние юности Б. Зайцева*, [в]: *Проблемы изучения жизни и творчества Б.К. Зайцева*, Калуга 2000, с. 96. (Translated by B. Wegnerska-Ptaszkiewicz).

⁷ *Ibidem*, c. 92.

The tetralogy *Gleb's Journey*, which is considered in the aspect of aesthetic reflection of spiritual biography of the writer, is undoubtedly the centre of interests for the investigators of literature. Zaitsev discovers in it all complicated ups and downs connected with his spiritual maturity. The writer crystallizes and consciously presents the way to the final victory of spirituality in his life and presents to the reader the details of difficult access to faith and true Christian values.

Gleb's autobiographical maturation alternates with an evangelical parable about the development of the tree of faith from the seed of white mustard, and the life travel of Zaitsev's protagonist is a model of shaping human personality in general⁸. Zaitsev presents a strong power of life and its unbroken progress. The man, according to Zaitsev, is not able to predict fate or change it. It is important to accept humbly everything that happens in life. The sense of Zaitsev's hero's existence is paying attention to the smooth and harmonious sequel of life. The hero of the tetralogy subordinates his life to higher truth.

The concept 'loneliness' appears in the novel as a philosophical category, spiritual engrossing in ourselves and at the same time setting free from everything that is unnecessary.

The idea of the tetralogy is to present the way of spiritual maturation of the autobiographical hero, the presentation in a comprehensive way (fate of the main hero) of the process of his own 'spiritual birth'. The autobiographical hero of the tetralogy perceives his life in a philosophical way. Zaitsev contrasts the complexities of fate, chaos with searching for the idea, sense of life, faith and the value of life and man's soul, which are a certificate of people's fate for the writer⁹. Life is valuable for the writer if it is connected with the aspiration for an absolute sphere. The ideas of love as eternal have been bothering a man for a long time and the Zaitsev's autobiographical hero is not exceptional in this respect¹⁰.

The sense of autobiography is situated in solving the sense of our own existence. The tetralogy is at the same time the writer's 'diary' evidencing the process of change of his soul, a record of the way to faith, the way leading through looking for and understanding Orthodox Russia, and being a marked out route to meeting and understanding God's will. Zaitsev like B. Pasternak in 'Doctor Zhivago', presents a dynamics of self-development of personality as an eternal quest, a pilgrimage and a journey to the limits of spirituality. Pasternak's novel which conveys the essence of Russian spirituality, drawing conclusions from individual experience written in the context of the history of Russia and the history of Russia is close to the Zaitsev's tetralogy. Both writers made their heroes and the events in which they are embroiled a peculiar medium of their own views, missing in a special way the things which were close to them and had a real sense for them.

Gleb's history and spiritual development is marked by the way which leads through "the skies of life" to higher moral ideals and becomes realized through conscious carrying its own cross, transforming the nature of a man under the influence of God's blessing. Zaitsev's Gleb carries on him this ray of God's grace, although he is not able

⁸ Ibidem, c. 192.

⁹ Ibidem, c. 191.

¹⁰ Compare: G. Przebinda, *Włodzimierz Solowjow wobec historii*, Kraków 1992, s. 88.

to perceive life and people who surround him through the prism of God's power automatically. God's strength, its meaning and intensity, grow in Gleb's soul gradually; however, they find their permanent place there.

Let us pay attention to the fact that Zaitsev has presented a gradation of his religious consciousness. The life of his autobiographical hero – like the life of every believer – was an embodiment of a great God' intention, eternal harmony. In accordance with the following, in the tetralogy Zaitsev has examined his own life and shone it through the prism of Christian truth. The philosophical attitude to the writing method can be called 'Christian realism'.

It can be stated that this realism also resolves itself into conscious acceptance not only of the writer's faith but also acceptance of the way leading to it. Moving on that way is described by Zaitsev step by step, and step by step are the events connected with the religious birth of the writer passed on.

In the first part of the tetralogy the context of the Optina Hermitage appears. The Pustyn was situated not far away from Kozelsk, in the Kaluga province. In the 19th and in the first twenty five years of the 20th century it was a centre of Russian spiritual rebirth. The Elder Paisius Velichkovsky (Pyotr Ivanovich Velichkovsky) was the founder of the Pustyn¹¹. It is known that Zaitsev in his maturity got interested in the history of the Pustyn. He regretted that the place of sanctity after the catastrophe of 1917 was demolished.

One should remember about a long and arduous way to religion and faith of Zaitsev's Gleb. This journey also required a spiritual maturation of the hero. J. Mianowska in accordance with that ascertains:

Gleb's journey towards religion and religiousness was presented by Zaitsev truthfully and uncoloured. Gleb was approaching God slowly, he tried to give sense to everything and understand (the same happened to Zajcev)¹².

In the second part of the tetralogy: *Silence* the autobiographical hero's experiences of spiritual dimension are richer, the circle of people who surround him is extending and new characters are introduced. The characters of clericals have a special meaning: the Fathers Parfienij and Alexander Grigorich with whom Gleb has a discussion about life and faith and who are the mouthpieces of Zaitsev's opinions about religion. Not accidentally, at the end of this part of his way of life the hero receives from the Father Parfienij a photography with a quotation on the reverse taken from the message of Saint Apostle.

Alexander Grigorich, a school inspector in Kaluga also uncovers God to Zaitsev's hero. Gleb's teacher regrets that he brought religion into his life too late, just like Zaitsev. The teacher tries to convey the truth about his life experiences and conclusions he had arrived at to his students. Consciousness and mind prompt him that the outside world is the hotbed of evil and destruction, he tries to find a positive dimension in the act of God's creation which seems to be an oasis of freedom, independence and happiness. The discovery of God in ourselves, in accordance with the teachings of Hryhorii

¹¹ For more detail see: В. Котельников, *Православные подвижники*, Москва 2002, с. 79.

¹² J. Mianowska, *Мироощущение православного человека (на материале тетралогии Б. Зайцева „Путешествие Глеба“)*, [В]: *Проблемы изучения жизни и творчества Б.К. Зайцева*. Вторые международные Зайцевские чтения, ред. А. Черников, Калуга 2000, s. 23.

Skovoroda, is the discovering of the divine spark which can be found in everyone. It is also fathoming the secrets of our consciousness¹³.

In the second part of the tetralogy *Silence* the religious context has been marked most suggestively in the character of a Russian Saint: Seraphim of Sarov. It is a figure commonly respected and adored against the background of Russian history of spirituality. Seraphim of Sarov for Zaitsev – the author of *Gleb's Journey* - is an example worth following, an ideal of 'Holy Russia'. Undoubtedly, the Saint embodies the idea of sanctity in himself which is characteristic of Russian religious consciousness. It can be said that in the pre-revolutionary period in the person of a Saint the thing which was named by I. Iljin was expressed:

Temples on which Russia kept and grew stronger¹⁴.

It is considered that Seraphim of Sarov was and still is for every Russian believer a kind of 'a corner stone' of the ideal of sanctity. This was the way in which the writer understood the Saint. Apart from Seraphim of Sarov, the author introduces in this part of the tetralogy a saintly man – John of Kronstadt. The figure of John of Kronstadt became for Zaitsev closer in his old age when religion became for him the only way to appropriate life.

The first chapters of the third part of the tetralogy titled *Youth* are the fathoming in the secret of his consciousness and searching for deep senses by Zaitsev's Gleb. Zaitsev introduces a kind of a whirl of experiences of youth: college, university and the first love. The beginning of Zaitsev's output fell on the period in which the first and at the same time lifelong love to his further wife, Vera (in the tetralogy Elli) was born.

The fictional Elli, in opposition to Gleb, nurses religious feeling from her childhood. She has a particular respect for Saint Nicholas Wonderworker. This Russian Saint was respected also by Zaitsev. Saint Nicholas was known also for numerous miracles and cures of the faithful. It seems that at the moment of the writer's disease the Saint's help was emphasized very clearly. There were no special chances for the unconscious and weakened Zaitsev to recover. At the climax the writer's wife who understood that he was at death's door put the icon with the portrait of the Wonderworker on his chest. On the next day the sick writer felt better and the disease receded evidently.

The same Saint rescues from death the already mentioned cousin of Zaitsev's Gleb – Sonia. The Wonderworker is the Saint of 'Saint Russia'. This is its symbol and embodiment of everything that Zaitsev understood under the concept of great people of Russia 'Holy Russia'. The Russian Saint is a penitent, ascetic and sacrifice who worked multiple miracles on the Russian land.

In the last part of the tetralogy *Tree of Life*, life of Zaitsev's hero is not a problem of spiritual loss in the world of pseudo-values any more. It is enlightened by the ray of faith which connects the temporal world – transitory with the eternal world – the mystical sphere¹⁵. The last part of the tetralogy became permeated with the reflections and considerations connected with the matter of faith. The above mentioned Nicholas

¹³ For more detail see: J. Kapuścik, *Inspiracje chrześcijańskie we współczesnej literaturze rosyjskiej. Uwagi wstępne do tematu*, „Przegląd Rusycystyczny”, s. 161.

¹⁴ *История русской святости...*, s. 377.

¹⁵ See: Н. Пак, *Путешествие Глеба Б.К. Зайцева. Православный приход Храма Казанской иконы Божией Матери в Ясенево*, Москва 2001; *Проблемы изучения...*, с. 105.

Wonderworker appears, Gennady Andreyevich (the father of Gleb's wife) gives as a present – the picture of this Saint to his granddaughter Tanya at the moment of leave-taking before her emigration. Gleb's cousin, Sonia, at the difficult moment looks for help with the same Russian Saint.

The last pages of the autobiography were devoted to the journey – the pilgrimage of the autobiographical hero and his wife in 1935 to Valaam. The pilgrimage to Valaam is strongly associated by Zaitsev with 'Holy Russia'. As the holy mountain Athos was for Zaitsev a symbol of God's presence on Earth, so the Valaam, a great sanctuary of the North, famous for its history, stories about saints, has a special place in the Zaitsev's hero's heart, it is a clamp clasping Gleb's religious maturation from full religious ignorance to joining the bosom of the Orthodox Church.

The whole Zaitsev's work is a lyrical memoirs of the past in which all hard experiences the writer came through become significant. The skill to combine events and facts appears first of all in his conviction of indissolubility of the past and the future. The past is for Zaitsev and his autobiographical hero the original source of birth of his spiritual values.

Emigration allowed the writer to perceive more, understand and evaluate more. These perceptions apply especially to the religious matters. Zaitsev's world is the world of Christian values, the truthful values – according to J. Kapuścik – is realized on the ground of humility towards the Creation, and not aspiration for happiness¹⁶. Zaitsev's values were emphasized together with the beginning of searching for God and 'unity', just the same as in Solovyov's originated searching for 'unity' as a synthesis of religion, philosophy and science – faith, thought and experience¹⁷. W. Zenkowsky emphasized that the idea of 'unity' gradually became the central idea and rule in Solovyov's philosophy¹⁸. Zaitsev could not stay away from Solovyov's influence, the philosophy of unity became visible already in the early stage of the writer's work.

Boris Zaitsev touched the 'everlasting problems' in his novel, from among which the most important is the matter of faith. With premises which led to deep faith the writer associates a conviction about the superiority of the world of Good over the world in which God does not exist. The world of true religious values for the writer is faith in God.

The author of *Gleb's Journey* believes that Russian faith is for his nation the highest sanctity. He knows that the Orthodox Church comprizes the ideals of the nation, the whole truth and justice of life. The central motif of Zaitsev's religious views is therefore the idea of a return to the roots, to the essential Russian values. According to Zaitsev, this return is necessary for the nation which lives with such strong faith. Zaitsev himself understood this fact perfectly when he lost the possibility to be in contact with God in his homeland. Emigration opened not only the writer's heart but also his eyes. Reflections which appear at the author of the *Gleb's Journey* resulted from the fact that he was convinced about the loss of the world of values, the world of religion which for the writer was Russia. Russia, according to Zaitsev is the country which keeps faith with the Gospel, the country carrying God in itself. The country which possesses such features- as Zaitsev thinks – can create a Christian community.

¹⁶ J. Kapuścik, *Inspiracje chrześcijańskie...*, s. 165.

¹⁷ G. Przebinda, *Włodzimierz Sołowjow...*, s. 8.

¹⁸ В. Зеньковский, *История русской философии*, Ленинград 1991, т. 2, ч. 1, с. 7-8.

Summary

Gradiation of religious consciousness in an autobiographical tetralogy by Boris Zaitsev

The article presents the most important work of Boris Zaitsev *Gleb's Journey*. Zaitsev in his reminiscences refers to a journey as an existential experience. The journey of the writer is the journey of an individual. The main point of Zaitsev's autobiography closes in a complicated, constant perceiving and reading sense of existence. This sense is also hidden in acquiring God's grace and joining the Orthodox Church. The life of his autobiographical hero was an embodiment of a great God' intention, eternal harmony. In accordance with the following, in the tetralogy Zaitsev has examined his own life and shone it through the prism of Christian truth.

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