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Theological Tropes in Piotr Cieplak's Theatre

ABSTRACT:

IN CONTEMPORARY ART, SEEMINGLY FAR FROM RELIGIOUS OR FAITH-RELATED AFFILIATIONS, ONE CAN FIND MANY THEOLOGICAL TROPES: HIDDEN VALUES, SYMBOLS AND MOTIFS. BEING FOCUSED ON EXISTENTIAL ISSUES, TOUCHING UPON THE PROBLEMS OF SUFFERING, DYING, LONGING AND LOVE, THEATRE IS STILL OPEN TO GETTING ENGAGED IN A DIALOGUE WITH THEOLOGY. PIOTR CIEPLAK, ONE OF THE CONTEMPORARY THEATRE DIRECTORS THAT IS WORTHY OF GREATER ATTENTION, USES THE LANGUAGE OF “VERGING REALITIES”, I.E. IN HIS PERFORMANCES, HE REFERS TO THE NOTIONS FROM THE REALM OF THEOLOGY. HE IS INTERESTED IN SUCH ISSUES AS FAITH, DOUBT, TRUST, HOPE AND SALVATION. ONE OF CIEPLAK’S INSPIRATIONS AT WORK IS THE THOUGHT OF TOMASZ HALIK, AN OUTSTANDING CZECH THEOLOGIAN. HIS DELIBERATIONS CONTAINED IN THE BOOK CIERPLIWOŚĆ WOBEC BOGA (PATIENCE WITH GOD) CAN BE A KEY TO INTERPRETING “SOMKOWY KAPELUSZ” PERFORMANCE. THIS FRENCH FARCE DRESSED WITH T.S. ELLIOT’S POETRY AND READ THROUGH THE THEOLOGICAL LENS OF TOMASZ HALIK BECOMES A STORY OF PATIENT WAITING FOR AN UNNAMED MYSTERY. HERE, CIEPLAK REFERS TO THE APOPHATIC THEOLOGY WHERE GOD IS DESCRIBED AS THE PRESENCE OF ABSENCE, A BEING IMPOSSIBLE TO EMBRACE OR LABEL IN ANY WAY. FROM THIS PERSPECTIVE, “SŁOMKOWY KAPELUSZ” IS A STORY OF A MAN WHO KNOWS THAT HE IS AN ACTOR IN THE BIG THEATRE OF THE WORLD, WHO BELIEVES, DOUBTS, ASK QUESTIONS, LONGS BUT IS UNSHAKABLY WAITING ON THE THRESHOLD OF THE MYSTERY.

KEYWORDS:

CRYPTOTHEOLOGY, APOPHATIC THEOLOGY, SŁOMKOWY KAPELUSZ, PIOTR CIEPLAK, TOMÁŠ HALIK

Studying the "touch points" between theology and other humanistic disciplines might seem dangerous and desirable at the same time. Theology, an unattractive discipline kept in seclusion for years, is now reclaiming its place in science and art¹. Jan Stanisław Wojciechowski proposed that after the performative turn, now we seem to deal with a theological turn, which makes us aware of the presence of religious codes in culture². Theological tropes and sparks emerge from the fields out of which (Christian) theology has long been expelled. Theatre is undoubtedly one of such fields, since it touches upon the meaning of life, death, suffering, physical evil, longing and love. It speaks about a man who is seeking their place in the world, a man in relationships with others, often in relationship with God. In his *Manifest teologii teatru* (Theatre Theology Manifesto), Paweł Dobrowolski emphatically asserts that it is impossible to drive God out of the modern stage³. Standing at the borderline between theology and theatre, it seems to be the most interesting and cognitively fruitful to study crypto-theological theatre, where what is connected with faith stays hidden and to see it the spectator needs to apply an appropriate code. Today's theatrical life proves it that theological sparks are there and flash out in many performances, even these produced by the artists who distance themselves from religion. There are also artists who are looking for a lost connection between man and God, even if God is seen as a kind of Absence.

Theological references can also be traced in the theatre of Piotr Cieplak, a "middle-generation" director. He employs the language of the touch point, i.e. he uses "dangerous notions" like hope, trust, openness and also faith, doubt and quest⁴. Piotr Cieplak's theatre tends to be perceived as a point of theological cognition⁵ or rather as theology framed in the language of theatre⁶. Cieplak's theatre can be *locus theologicus* mainly due to the three factors, i.e. incarnation, drama and transformation, as suggests Jacek Kopciński referring to Józef Tischner's thought presented in *Filzofia dramatu* (Drama Philosophy). Incarnation is to be understood predominantly as a word incarnated in a body, in theatre - an incarnation of words of a drama into actor's body, into performer's activities which are played out in a specific time and space. While the drama words are fictional and the body is artificial, they can actualize genuine things. A human being is a dramatic being, human existence is dramatic in its character, and the highest ranking drama is the one being played out between man and God. After all, it is the source for

¹ Bielik-Robson, A., „*Na pustyni*”. *Kryptoteologie późnej nowoczesności*, Kraków 2008.

² Wojciechowski, J. S., *Teologia kultury: chrześcijańskiej, politycznej, wizualnej?*, „*Studia Theologica Varsoviensia*” 2010, No. 1, p. 63-73.

³ Dobrowolski, P., *Nie przegoncie Boga ze sceny! Manifest teologii teatru*, „*Więź*” 2007, No. 5, p. 4-10.

⁴ *O praktykowaniu wiary w ogrodzie*, z Piotrem Cieplakiem rozmawiał Jakub Niżniowski, „*Teatr*” 2012, No. 12, http://www.teatr-pismo.pl/ludzie/356/o_praktykowaniu_wiary_w_ogrodzie/, accessed on 02.01.2015

⁵ Kopciński, J., *Teatr jako miejsce teologiczne*, w: *Wierzyć i widzieć*, K. Flader, D. Jaszewska et al., Sandomierz 2013, p. 289-295.

⁶ Kopciński, J., *Teologia w działaniu*, <http://www.teatr-pismo.pl/archiwalna/index.php?sub=archiwum&f=pokaz&nr=523&pnr=33>, accessed on 10.01.2015.

any other drama. Human, getting open themselves onto another person, onto space in which they live, and the time passing by, can undergo a transformation. The drama with man can evolve into a deeper and grater drama with God. This is willingly explored by theatre. In its artificial onstage-world, by means of fictitious drama word incarnated by actors, people undergo a transformation, i.e. they get to know themselves as spiritual beings, explains Kopciński. Hence, theatre can be a field of experiencing the transcendent, getting to know oneself in relationship with other people and God. This is what Piotr Cieplak mainly deals with in his theatre.

The directors performances can also be interpreted through the lens of Tomáš Halík's thought. Cieplak is well familiar with the writings of this distinguished Czech theologian and he often sources from him in theatre⁷. Halík's thoughts are with him when selecting material, as well as during rehearsals, while building characters or directing. He is interested in the encounters of faith with lack thereof, certainty with doubt, light with darkness. What is typical of Cieplak's strange characters is patient waiting which sometimes is a source of fears and sometimes - of hope. The characters of his theatre stories are people living at the "outskirts of life", constantly in doubt, asking questions, who are placed between two "entrenched parties": self-confident believers and equally self-confident atheists⁸. Their prototype is biblical Zacchaeus, who listens to Jesus's teachings being distanced and hidden. He was looking for him and waited for him. Probably the best "Zacchaeus" in Cieplak's theatre is a figure played by Cezary Kosiński in *Milczenie o Hiobie* (Being Silent about Job; first staged on 24 Oct. 2013, Teatr Narodowy). In his monologue, he admits that he is both believer and non-believer. His faith gets mixed with doubt (one of Cieplak's favourite books is *Co nie jest chwilę jest nietrwale. Labiryntem świata z wiarą i wątpliwościami* by Tomáš Halík. In the book the theologian proves that faith deprived of doubt turns into hubris, whereas doubt deprived of faith ends up as cynicism). When he asserts that the God is nonexistent, it is not long that he starts to feel emptiness and pointlessness of life, whereas when he turns to faith, he gets surrounded by kitschy, primitive and devotional manifestations of Polish religiousness, which pushes him back towards atheism. He does not feel good on either side. Therefore, he keeps asking, is on the lookout, rebels and ask questions again. It seems that one can ascribe him words that come from *Traktat teologiczny* (Treaty on Theology) by Czesław Miłosz, one of Cieplak's favourite poets: "It is also my share that one day I do believe, and the other day I don't." In the *Milczenie o Hiobie*, one of its characters disarmingly admits: "There are things that you can neither explain or understand." What remains is to wait patiently. This attitude is an often characteristic of Cieplak's characters. Even *Lokomotywa*, a performance dedicated for children, based on Julian Tuwim's poems, is about waiting and existing at the verge of an impenetrable mystery.

⁷ *O praktykowaniu wiary w ogrodzie*, z Piotrem Cieplakiem rozmawiał Jakub Niżniowski, dz. cyt.; *Indianin w „Księdze raju”*, z Piotrem Cieplakiem rozmawia Basia Klicka, http://www.cwiszn.pl/files/files/cieplak_37-40.pdf, accessed on 12.01.2015.

⁸ Halík, T., *Cierpliwość wobec Boga. Spotkanie wiary z niewiarą*, przeł. A. Babuchowski, Kraków 2011, p. 24.

In *Patience with God*, Tomáš Halík roaming the apophatic theology deals mainly with the issue of the hidden, silent God, the One that remains the Mystery, Whom it is easier to define by saying what He is not rather than otherwise. In the Prologue, the theologian says: "I know three - deeply interconnected - ways of being patient with God's absence. They are called faith, hope and love." Further he highlighted that: "(...) the Mystery is 'impenetrable' for man. The Mystery, unlike a problem, cannot be solved, one needs to patiently perch on its threshold and be within it"⁹. These words can be used as a key to many Cieplak's performances, also *Słomkowy kapelusz* (A Straw Hat) which was first staged in Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw in 2005. Taking this rather simple farce whose plot revolves around looking for a counterpart of a worn-out hat, Cieplak seems to have surprised everyone with the way he handled it being heavily focused on perfecting the gesture and movement, highlighting the sound and musicality of words. The director unexpectedly finished off the Eugène Labiche text with excerpts from *Four Quartets* by Thomas S. Eliot. Added to the play's script, the poet's lines opened new ways of interpreting meanings, broadened the meaning of the characters' actions.

O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark,
The vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant into the vacant,
The captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters,
1 The generous patrons of art, the statesmen and the rulers, (...)
And we all go with them, into the silent funeral,
Nobody's funeral, for there is no one to bury.
I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God. As, in a theatre,
The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed (...).
I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing¹⁰

Thanks to the T. S. Eliot poem the French farce gains entirely new dimension. Recited by Adam Woronowicz at the beginning and at the end by Eliza Borowska they put the "little people struggles" into a meaningful story, despite the deep down feeling of the things unknown and impenetrable. At Eliot's, just as at Halík's, the three theological virtues are patient waiting, being patient with God. The patience that is needed to be able to accept the paradoxes of the world, to persevere at the brink of impenetrable mystery which sometimes gets partially unveiled, only to get even more hidden. It was already in

⁹ Therein, p.7.

¹⁰ Eliot, T.S., *Four Quartets*, Florida 1968.



The performance was enacted masterfully, with an utmost care to the pace, precision of movement, body vividness, sounding of the words. Let me, however, focus on the most important scene, that is the final one.

Theological tropes are there to be found both in form and in its textual content. In the last scene, all the decorative elements disappear and there is a wedding procession with blue umbrellas, which spread out over actors' heads created a coloured splash, a metaphor of heaven, they were a sign of the unnamed.

St. Paul's letters that hope, along with faith and love, was a patient waiting for the thing that is yet to be seen. It seems worth referring now to a thought of Adel Bestavros, an Egyptian thinker, who wrote: "Patience with others is love, patience with oneself is hope and patience with God is faith¹¹."

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Actors speak their lines without directing them at any specific addressee but just towards empty space. All of them look into one direction, which highlighted the effect of waiting.

¹¹ Bestavros, A., cyt. za: T. Halík, *Cierpliwość wobec Boga...*, op. cit.

¹² Bible, English Revised Version, Psalm 79:2

"Daddy, I can't do it any longer. I'm tired. I must sit down", said Helenka who had just got married, when accompanied by the wedding procession, she was on the lookout for her husband.

"Not on the ground, you're going to soil your dress", replies her father.

The entire procession echoes these words: "Not on the ground, not on the ground." They sounded like a warning, called for patience in waiting. To sit down would be to cease the wander, to quit the role and renounce the mystery. The wander of Cieplak's characters goes on without any specified aim. It is not like Odysseus's coming back home, rather like Abraham's wandering towards the unknown. One of the characters standing under a blue umbrella asks hesitantly "And where are we?" For me, it is the key question, and not only in the case of this performance but Cieplak's theatre as such. The way that the *Słomkowy kapelusz* characters go by is a way of patient waiting, as Halík writes. The way is a winding one. At times it gets out of sight and one incessantly needs to look for it, sometimes one goes into the wrong direction or even missing it can fall into a precipice. The mystery does not belong to the surface.

"It's time to go to lie down", said another character full of resignation.

"But not on the ground"

"I can't carry on any longer"

"Everything anew", said someone from under an umbrella.

"Everything anew?", asked someone else in disbelief.

"Everything anew", said someone definitely.

The performance ends with a line that echoes the lines of Beckett's characters (like Winnie's from *Happy Days* or the character's from one-act plays *Not I*, *Footfalls* or *Rockaby*). Before the curtain has fallen, the *Słomkowy kapelusz* characters keep staying on stage, holding their umbrellas and looking somewhere in the distance with a longing expression on their faces. They keep waiting. "The best (...) that a man can do (though, unfortunately, the most difficult at the same time) is to wait, be vigilant and ready for the coming. In any situation, and especially when the darkness stirs up packs of rebellious thoughts¹³."

What they are waiting for, what are they to repeat anew? "The one who is absent", admitted Cieplak, "and who is spoken about, has more faces and is universal. I have worked on *Waiting for Godot* twice (though I have never finished the performance). In other words, it is 'waiting for God'. He never comes there at the end. I believe that His absence is perhaps the fullest possible image of God¹⁴." Piotr Cieplak's God is both hidden and on the lookout for man. The director uses the concepts sourced from apophatic theology where God is expressed as a presence of Absence. It is an incomprehensible God. It is impossible to describe Him by means of notions or linguistic constructs. The essence of His

¹³ J. Kopciński, *Oczekiwanie*, „Teatr” 2005, nr 4-6, <http://www.e-teatr.pl/pl/artykuly/15547.htm>, dostęp 16.01.2015.

¹⁴ *O praktykowaniu wiary w ogrodzie*, op. cit.



Does not the supposition that one cannot say anything about God lead us to a simple conclusion that God is nothingness? Cieplak rejects this reasoning, describing it as too easy. In fact, for this director God is unknown, impenetrable and causes a feeling of lack. Man can feel this lack very intensely and strives to fill up the empty space.

being is inexpressible. God, as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite asserted, is "an unnamed name", "an super-being being". It is an unending and perfect mystery. Apophatic theology does not claim the right to offer ultimate or exhaustive answers regarding the existential matters, it rather teaches us how to live with aporia¹⁵. In this theology, one says about downward transcendence, about looking for God through screaming¹⁶, which is the essence of Christianity of co-suffering.

Does not the supposition that one cannot say anything about God lead us to a simple conclusion that God is nothingness? Cieplak rejects this reasoning, describing it as too easy. In fact, for this director God is unknown, impenetrable and causes a feeling of lack. Man can feel this lack very intensely and strives to fill up the empty space. It is the main motif for action for Cieplak's characters. One can see it clearly in one of the latest performances staged by the director - in *Milczenie o Hiobie* (Being Silent About Job). Out of the monologues of the characters gathered in one room, who - as it might seem - have very little in common, there emerge universal questions that have been asked from the beginning of time: "Where is God?". "Where was God during great historical tragedies?" "Why does He send suffering onto innocent people?" "Why does He let them suffer?" There are no satisfactory answers, however. "God is as silent as Sphinx, and fails to answer", as one of the characters read - she is recording for radio excerpts from *Dziennik z Bunkra Miła 34* (Bunker Miła 34 Diary). The theodicy problem seems to be irresolvable, especially in the context of the Second World War: the Holocaust and the Warsaw Uprising. The director indicates here the other side of religious people experience: darkness, a time when one does not feel God's presence, when God is cruelly silent. But it is only the experience of both brightness and darkness that gives an opportunity to experience fullness, the brightness is bright only when one can see it from the perspective of darkness.

¹⁵ Schlette, H. R., cyt. za: I. Bokwa, *Teologia w warunkach nowoczesności i ponowoczesności*, Sandomierz 2010, p. 412.

¹⁶ Metz, J. B., *Teologia wobec cierpienia*, przeł. J. Zychowicz, Kraków 2008, p. 90.

Słomkowy kapelusz is about asking questions which fail to lead us to concrete answers. The world revolves unfailingly and the human story is being played out over and over again anew. One could say, following the title wording of one of Cieplak's performances, it is a never-ending story. People are born, die, live with each other and next to one another. For years, Piotr Cieplak speaks in his theatre about the man who believes and doubts, waits and longs. At the end of the day, the man does not lose their hope. They are not alone. They are today's Zacchaeus, who is gazing from a distance and is looking for his place; sometimes it is Job, who even if cannot understand what is happening around him, wins the test, is silent and waiting. *Słomkowy kapelusz* is a performance about patient waiting at the brink of the mystery. ■

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