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Imaginative Contemplation based on The Starlight Night by Gerard Manley Hopkins

Domišljajska kontemplacija na podlagi Zvezdnate noči Gerarda Manleya Hopkinsa

Abstract: The question of poetry as related to religious contemplation reveals the double-sided problem of image. On the one hand, there is the poetical image which consists in the metaphorical character of speech supported by the whole range of artistic means. On the other hand, the use of images becomes yet more interesting when connected with religious contemplation which is defined in terms of looking at the truth. Hence, the poetical image may be the way for a contemplating beholder. In this field, the question arises how a poetical vision could act in contemplation following its special requirements. In order to emphasize its substantial significance, imagination, including fairy associations, will be the special object of this research. This purpose will be achieved through the analysis of *The Starlight Night* by Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889), interpreted in the context of Christian understanding of contemplation. The order of presentation implies the exposition of literary ability of the poem, a consideration of its relation to the essence of contemplation and, finally, a terminological proposition for this kind of prayer. The usefulness of a poetical image in a religious field will then be proved and described.

Keywords: poetical image, contemplation, imagination, a gaze on the truth, loving knowledge

Povzetek: Vprašanje pesništva v razmerju do verske kontemplacije razkriva dvojni problem podobe. Na eni strani stoji pesniška podoba, ki jo tvori metaforični značaj govora s širokim naborom umetniških pomenov; na drugi strani pa raba podob postane še zanimivejša ob njihovi navezavi na versko kontemplacijo, ki jo opredeljuje zrenje resnice. Na tak način je lahko pesniška podoba sredstvo nosilca kontemplacije. Tu se pojavlja vprašanje, na kakšen način lahko pesniški pogled deluje v okviru kontemplacije, ki ima svoje lastne zahteve. Da bi poudarili ključni pomen pesniške podobe, vključno z njenimi pravljimi asociacijami, v tej raziskavi posebno pozornost namenjamo prav omenjenemu vidiku. To dosežemo z analizo pesmi *Zvezdnata noč* Gerarda Manleya Hopkinsa (1844–

1889), ki jo interpretiramo v kontekstu krščanskega razumevanja kontemplacije. Vrstni red predstavitve tematike vključuje pojasnitev literarnega naboja pesmi, njeno razmerje do bistva kontemplacije in predlog terminološke označbe takšne oblike molitve. Ob tem utemeljujemo in prikazujemo tudi uporabnost pesniške podobe na verskem področju.

Ključne besede: pesniška podoba, kontemplacija, domišljija, zrenje resnice, ljubeče znanje

1. Introduction

Poetry and spirituality appear as two different, although interconnected areas of human activity. A preferred instrument of expression in both is an image. A poetical image consists not only in dealing with colorful epithets, but in the transforming of a speech mainly through tropes (metaphors) to give a new figurative look at reality (Chrzastowska 1897, 310). In making metaphors visual, impressions and satisfaction play a privileged role (Cicero 1983, 166). Also, in the theology of the Christian inner life, meditation and contemplation are genres dealing with an image, though it needs further explanation. Both kinds of the beholding act can be united in religious poetry wherein human artistic passion carries the greatness of spiritual experience or poetry meets some criterion of a meditating or contemplating prayer. In his study, Krašovec demonstrates how strictly metaphor pertains to the essence of life. It poses part of a knowing structure: »we actually perceive and act in accordance with the metaphors« (Krašovec 2016, 578) because »rationality is imaginative by its very nature« (582). It expresses the wholeness of human experience, both rational and emotional, inner and outer (580–581).¹

The examination of such a liaison seems to be an interesting project which here will be carried out by the analysis of one sonnet by Gerard Manley Hopkins (Hopkins 1992, 56; Thornton and Varenne 2003, 21–22) for its eminently artistic and religious values. The aim is to show how the capacity of artistic work relates to the stream of religious life which next poses the question of what kind of contemplation such a poem could be. The issue will be treated in the following sequence: poetical capacity – theological dimension – a problem of a genre. Thus, *pro tem* contemplation is comprehended very generally as a gaze on God or His works. The Greek term *theōria*, standing for Latin *contemplatio*, comes from *theá*, that means ‚seeing‘ (Špidlik et al. 2004, 138–139). A religious poem is a place where some »momentary glimpse of the abyss of light which has its original wellspring in God« (John Paul II 1999, 6) is taken and written down. Let this kind of contemplation by virtue of its artistic substance be called ‚aesthetic contemplation‘ (John Paul II 1999, 6). However, the term ‚imagination‘, used here and in similar kinds

¹ The imaginative exploration of the universe ought to be combined with other ways, like a scientific insight (Vranješ 2019, 33–37) to present various aspects of its dynamics and depth. It also ought to be noticed how strictly poetic power pertains to the question of transcendence (Staudigl 2017, 527–529).

of art, means human capacity to produce images, the capacity which in itself embraces not only direct religious forms, like in Ignatian contemplation (Platovnjak 2018), but also free ‚autonomic‘ expressions, especially of fairy character. This is notable due to how fictional imagination, traditionally put away from a religious field (2018, 1037), could serve this contemplation.

This consideration may also provide a good argument to the question of religious poetry which finds diverse, sometimes diminishing, definitions (Gardner 1971, 121–142). Undoubtedly, an accurate analysis and interpretation of the text concentrated on deriving senses according to the *isotopy of sensus operis* (Eco 1996, 45–65) constitute a way no less useful than some critical disquisitions in this field. It also poses the way both of fruitful and living activation of tradition, where some values must be ‚passed on‘ to further generations (Pevc Rozman 2012, 624–625). It would be interesting to consider the role of such ‚aesthetic contemplation‘ in the frame of the secular age (Žalec 2019).

The Starlight Night

*»Look at the stars! look, look up at the skies!
O look at all the fire-folk sitting in the air!
The bright boroughs, the circle-citadels there!
Down in dim woods the diamond delves! the elves'-eyes!
The grey lawns cold where gold, were quickgold lies!
Wind-beat whitebeam! airy abeles set on a flare!
Flake-doves sent floating forth at a farmyard scare! –
Ah well! it is all a purchase, all is a prize.*

*Buy then! bid then!—What?—Prayer, patience, alms, vows.
Look, look: a May-mess, like on orchard boughs!
Look! March-bloom, like on mealed-with-yellow shallows!
These are indeed the barn; withindoors house
The shocks. This piece-bright paling shuts the spouse
Christ home, Christ and his mother and all his hallows.«*

2. Poetical Capacity of the Object

Just the first formula which opens the poem suggests the reality of contemplation. The appeal »Look« has been repeated four times in lines 1 and 2 making a clear opening, and then again three times in lines 10 and 11 in order to strengthen this effect. The invitation of artistic ‚looking at‘ can be understood as the invitation to this prayer of ‚looking at‘—which is motivated by the religious tenor of the poem. The analogy goes further when allowing for the fact that the reader is called to ‚look at the stars‘ or to ‚look at the skies‘ which semantically and traditionally belong to a religious area. This can be illustrated by the line: »When I see

/.../ the moon and stars that you set in place« (Ps 8:4)² or by lifting Jesus' eyes up to heaven to see the Father (The Sunday Missal 1984, 41). Then a physical glance is accompanied by a spiritual attitude.

At the poetical level, the act of ‚looking at‘ results in a series of images being imaginative interpretations of the stars sensually perceived. Hopkins' brilliant expressions clearly prove his poetical imagination. It is enough to point out a few of them. The real stars are like »the fire-folk sitting in the air«, »the bright boroughs« or »the circle-citadels« (2,3). The speaker releases his poetical potency which bursts out in a series of metaphors in the joyful act of naming the stars by unexpected, but well-justified word formulas as well as by other poetical means.

Based on an iambic pentameter, Hopkins uses his own version of rhythm called ‚sprung rhythm‘ which combines the regularity of accents with the irregularity of syllables in one verse and perfectly serves the expression of inner experience, like admiration (Barańczak 1992, 18–19; Leithauser 2003, xxvii). It can be seen for example in lines 6, 7, 9, 14. The impression of density or complexity is even stronger due to alliteration and sound-instrumentation as follows: »the bright boroughs«, »the circle-citadels«, »dime in dim woods the diamond delves« and »the elves-eyes«. Each of these metaphors is constructed upon one dominating syllable, respectively – b-c-d-e – that follows alphabetical order. Also, the expression »Wind-beat whitebeam« has the similar structure of two parts connected by their phonic likeness. As a result, these pictures are coherent units striking in their sound effect. But after all Hopkins' inventions make room for the reader's ‚looking at‘ along with admiration and other feelings.

Thereinafter, the final sense of the poem can be presented. From the position of triple-repeated ‚Look‘ in lines 10 and 11, the inner division of the sonnet is seen. The first part contains the tropes of a ‚fairy‘ character which are followed by the group of ‚botanical figures‘ (»grey lawns«, »wind-beat whitebeam«, »airy abeles«, »a May-mess«, »March-bloom«, »orchard boughs«, »mealed-with-yellow shallows«) these – especially through »a farmyard scare« – prepares the beholder to face the second part, the final conclusion in the form of ‚rural‘ metaphors:

*»These are indeed³ the barn; withindoors house
The shocks. This piece-bright paling shuts the spouse
Christ home, Christ and his mother and his all his hallows.«*

The stars are displayed as a big barn-like building where the shocks are laid down; though more correctly, this is the starlight ‚sky‘ which should be called the barn, whereas the shocks mean the ‚stars‘ by virtue of similarity of color and relation between size. Enjoying the poetical freedom, but being still within the limits of style, Hopkins continues with the image of »the piece-bright paling«, which refers to the row of the stars, and pays attention to the house. Here it is worth

² Biblical quotes according to <http://www.usccb.org/bible>.

³ *Nota bene* that ‚indeed‘ paradoxically strengthens this metaphor.

seeing that in both pictures ,the stars' constitute the smaller element against the bigger one, which are put in pairs: »the shocks« – »the barn«; »the piece-bright paling« – »the home« though the reader's attention is led from the bigger to the smaller one (»the barn« – »the shocks«) and then from the smaller to the bigger element (»the paling – »the home«). This order allows one to look at the stars, but later to terminate in the image of the home just like a paling indicates a house for a visitor. In this way, the last picture is clearly shown, and the home turns out to belong to »Christ and his mother and all his hallows«. The starlight night is a space inhabited by God with His saints besides the figure of Christ is distinguished by the double-use of His name as well as the enjambment, which through the suspension of reading, joins Christ with His very important title that is – ,the spouse'. In this manner the idea of bride's love uniting God with people – rooted in Song of Songs – evidently appears to acknowledge that the night experience of ,gazing on' is fulfilled by love. One of the connotations of love, namely ,warmth', links the love with the house and country life resulting in the coherence of the poetical images. This vision is based on the Revelation, explicite on the Creation. Applying the rural motives enlightens Christ's love with a new light and produces a refreshing effect on the human mind even more if it is equipped with somebody's personal experience of a village. According to the tradition, the sky appears as God's home, but now it is seen anew, by the connotation of warmth with both the light-play and admiration. This kind of poetical work expresses the depth of harmony between God's immanence and transcendence with any distortion of that order, which characterizes feminist theology when reducing God's personal transcendence (Furlan Štante 2017). Hopkins-like real experience of beauty, love and closeness to God, along with genuine Christian mysticism, remains a key-argument in contemporary discourse about theology. (Roszak and Huzarek 2019; Platovnjak and Svetelj 2019)

3. Contemplative Status of the Work

However, the connection of the poetry and contemplation requires wider explanation. The question is how such ease of imagination refers to the truth or whether poetical vision, drawing on fantasy, is a kind of contemplation, essentially connected with truth.

Although this poetical visualization seems to move away from the truth, in fact, it bears a religious imprint for several reasons. Firstly, the action aims to express the beauty of the real things. Secondly, the speaker closes the first part of his poem with the religious metaphor of purchase (8,9) saying that man can buy this fairy richness by »prayer, patience, alms, vows«, that is by a pious and ascetic life.⁴

⁴ Knowing God and His works can be perceived as the transcendence of a self, which is conditioned by proper ethical involvement. It protects ,aesthetic contemplation' against pure subjectivity and opens it for contemplation. The same concept of ethical transcendence matters for contemporary philosophy and religious thought. (Dirscherl 2019, 328–331)

In conclusion, these four words refer to the stars along with their artistic reflections. This means that the poetical harvest of fairy imagination belongs to the order of sanctification. The third reason is the fact that the stars, as real objects equipped with metaphors, are ascribed to Christ as well as His mother and saints (13,14). In turn, the real, non-fictional status of Christ can be proved in the following way: 1) This point is possible and noncontradictory; 2) It is supported by the context of Hopkins' life (see below) and the rich tradition of religious lyrical poetry. For example, the metaphor of 'the barn' and 'home' evokes the well-known apprehension of the universe as God's house (Ps 104:2-3) of which *The Starlight Night* is a brilliant variation; 3) It is justified by the words: »prayer, patience, alms, vows« which in reality, as actual activities, aim to real Christ. The fairy vision – being the consequence of ascetics (to buy the view of stars for prayer etc.) – remains within this religious, real direction towards God, who then must be comprehended as the real one. In fact, poetical imagination somehow intercedes between spiritual exercises and Christ and is rooted in reality.

This question matters in Hopkins' personal life. When searching for the essence of his vocation, for some time he rejected using imagination and considered it an obstacle on the spiritual path. But later, being more familiar with John Duns Scotus' philosophy, Gerard Manley let himself be a poet free of any fear of the creative power of the mind. His own idea of 'inscape' which –following Scotus' *haecceitas* – means the inner form (the proprieties) of thing (Barańczak 1992, 9–11) implies the invention and employment of exceptional and individual associations inasmuch that they confirm a poet's way of perceiving. It was in this spirit, Hopkins wrote (1877) his sonnets along with *The Starlight Night*.⁵ In contradiction to W. H. Gardner's statement that he was allowed to use his imagination not as a Jesuit but as a Christian poet (Barańczak 1992, 10), it can be said that Loyola's rule of *tantum-quantum* in fact opens room for such use of imagination that serves to give praise to the Lord. St. Ignatius words: »from this it follows that man is to use them [created things] as much as they help him on to his end, and ought to rid himself of them so far as they hinder him as to it« (Ignatius of Loyola 1914, 23) –which were surely on Hopkins' mind – sufficiently justify his poetical work. Since the *tantum-quantum* rule concern using all goods different from God it includes artistic means too. Therefore, Hopkins' metaphors, having captured the 'inscape' of the stars, confirm God's infinite creative power and presence, however through a fictional rather than an actual vision. The fairy character of connotations could even play a more important role if G. K. Chesterton's consideration was adduced. In Orthodoxy he noticed that it is imagination and the spirit of fables that enable people to avoid a rational trap and to keep a mind fresh enough for the full experience of reality (Chesterton 1999, 59–90). Also B. Leithauser clearly expounds that in Hopkins' deed »every earthly act served a higher cause« (Leithauser 2003, xxiii) that also embraces poetry (xvii) of which Christ is »the only just literary critic« (xxvi). The Jesuit poet combined »fidelity to the object

⁵ About Hopkins' specific understanding of a sonnet see Fenton 2004, 79–80, and Hopkins 2003, 96–97.

under his eye« (,inscape') with »loyalty to a divinely sanctioned task« (xxvii). Thus, imagination is theologically allowed.

It is time to pose the question how such 'aesthetic contemplation' can be classified in terms of theology. Firstly, it is clear that it is not mystical prayer in its final sense. St. Thomas defines it as »the simple act of gazing on the truth« (*Summa Theologiae* II–II, q. 180, a. 3) stressing that 'simple' signifies one perfect act⁶ through which man rests upon the truth. Whereas, Hopkins' vision consists of a multitude of particular acts and could be perceived only as a preparation for a full contemplative gaze, belonging to a process, but not the final point of this state. In this sense Thomas claims that contemplation »has many acts whereby it arrives at this final act« (II–II, q. 180, a. 3). Then, the answer must be found somewhere within the passage between meditation and mystical contemplation. It seems to be clear that the poem does not meet any strict criterion of neither acquired contemplation, for lack of the same feature of simplicity,⁷ nor a prayer of simplicity analogically consisting in the simplification of spiritual activity to one act of gazing on the truth, though not yet at a mystical level (Słomkowski 2000, 225).

Several following places will help to specify the status of this 'aesthetic contemplation'. St. Thomas, speaking about 'cogitation' which proceeds contemplation, incorporates to it »the imaginations« (*Summa Theologiae* II–II, q. 180, a. 3). Thus, Hopkins' work can be named 'cogitation' or 'imaginative cogitation'. Furthermore, St. Ignatius draws on the term contemplation instead of meditation in his *Spiritual Exercises* (e.g. »a visible contemplation or meditation«; Loyola 1914, First Exercise) ascribing to it the function of imagination⁸. But here some interesting difference appears. Loyola's postulation of the composition of the place (*compositio loci*) tends to make a realistic presentation of the topic, whilst Hopkin's imagination produces fantastic associations. For this reason, his verse is not the pure composition of the place, although being very near. The poem could be apprehended as a variant of visible contemplation with a special role of artistic imagination. Its explanation lies in another Loyola's rule:

For, if the person who is making the Contemplation, takes the true groundwork of the narrative, and, discussing and considering for himself, finds something which makes the events a little clearer or brings them a little more home to him – whether this comes through his own reasoning, or because his intellect is enlightened by the Divine power – he will get more spiritual relish and fruit, than if he who is giving the Exercises had much explained and amplified the meaning of the events. For it is not knowing much, but realising and relishing things interiorly, that contents and satisfies the soul (Ignatius of Loyola 1914, Second Annotation).

⁶ C.f. »/.../ if there are several operations of the contemplative life, there will be, not one, but several contemplative lives« (*Summa Theologiae*, II–II, q. 180, a. 3)

⁷ The acquired contemplation is »a 'simple' and loving knowledge of God and of His works, which is the fruit of our personal activity aided by grace« (Garrigou-Lagrange 2011, 3:31).

⁸ The term contemplation is here preferred for the trait of looking at an object.

These properties of contemplation can be finally found in Hopkins' poem (or something of the same kind). Although the message of the poem does not come from any systematic reflection, it is indeed an effect of previously acquired theological awareness. More importantly, the poetical images bring the event – here the created thing – ,a little more home' to man. Through them the object is being ,tasted', ,relishing interiorly' so that the speaker shares and enjoys the ,in scape' of the thing. Hopkins' contemplation⁹ follows what the Psalmist experiences when admiring the beauty of heaven exactly by virtue of metaphors:

*»You spread out the heavens like a tent;
setting the beams of your chambers upon the waters.
You make the clouds your chariot;
traveling on the wings of the wind.
You make the winds your messengers;
flaming fire, your ministers.« (Ps 104: 2-4)*

Consequently, the English poet's work is the same as a Biblical kind of contemplation built on the artistic imagination, which brings man closer to God in accordance with the *tantum-quantum* principle. By virtue of metaphors the observation is comprehended; it is deeply rooted in the subject's personal life and thereby the bond between man and God is made stronger. Imagination means one's reawakening and egression (*excessus*) towards transcendence. Also, Hopkins's extraordinary creativity and even fantasy produce this kind of effect.

The contemplative character of the poem is justified by the concentration on one object (the stars) which culminates in Christ. The first collection of tropes is followed and outstripped by the ,rural' metaphors¹⁰ which finally point to Jesus. Symbolically, ,a mess' of fantasy is directed (the verb ,shuts') to one destination. Indeed, it shows that poetical, even fantastic imagination is shaped by a poet's artistic discipline (the structure of his poem) and spiritual maturity. And though it does not become simple in a strict theological sense of the word, at the same time, it demonstrates that simplicity is present here as a tendency. For this reason, *The Starlight Night* may be called contemplation ,being born' – in *statu nascendi*, just like the cogitation mentioned above. In the end, for this kind of poetry the name ,aesthetic' or ,imaginative contemplation' seems to be correct. For the substance of the act of ,looking at' it is called contemplation, for the differentiating role of imagination it is called aesthetic / imaginative.

Additionally, one can see that the contemplative character of the poem is yet more evident. The work has two important traits of contemplation apprehended as »loving knowledge of God and of His works« (Garrigou-Lagrange 2011, 3:31). There, the reader finds in Christ either true (the real status of Christ) or love (,the spouse') along with the impression of warm beauty.

⁹ C.f. Leithauser's description of Hopkins' poetical look as »contemplating« (Leithauser 2003, xxviii).

¹⁰ Notice that the rural metaphors are betokened by the words: »a farmyard scare« or »orchard boughs« etc. In general Hopkins' presentation goes from the fairy forms through the area of plants to the last household pictures.

The functions of the stars turn out to be some element of the theological contemplation. Placed between man and God, on the one hand, they bring human mind – through the artistic inspiration – closer to God according to the role of God’s creatures as the objects of a prayer (2014, 3:31). But on the other hand, they – as compared to ,the paling’ which ,shuts’ the heavenly home – suggest the mystery approached and shared by man, however not yet completely. By contrast to the saints, living all in Christ’s home, the contact of temporal and eternal dimensions is marked to evoke human destination (Roszak Huzarek 2019, 747–748; Malmenvall 2018, 390–392). The final metaphor of Christ, his mother and saints’ rural home, conveys the prospect of rest and peace, named *otium* (Merton 2005, 51) – the essential fruit of Christian contemplation. This role of poetical means brings about an increase in the loving knowledge of God and His works. The experience of the object, that is created beauty, lifts man towards Christ; and poetical capacity is the capacity of worship. By virtue of the ,imaginative contemplation’, spiritual reality of grace may be shared.

4. Conclusion

The analysis above has shown how consequent use of poetical means may pose some kind of religious contemplation. Hopkins’ brilliant poem provides a very good example of this prayer. Through poetical images on a spiritual path, the reader experiences the creation which brings him to the real God. Such traits of contemplation like the loving knowledge of God and his works and a gaze on the truth are successfully carried out, whilst the others like simplicity are not fully imposed. This allows us to call this work and similar artefacts contemplation in process – *in statu nascendi*. Consequently, for the exceptional substantial role of imagination—against the background of Christian tradition—the term aesthetic or imaginative contemplation could be properly proposed. Thus, an important manner of Christian prayer, built on artistic talents, is recalled and underlined which will help to make use of this possibility in the contemporary experience and proclamation of loving faith.

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