Between “full moon and summer solstice”. The quest for transcendence in the poetry of Andrzej Busza

Abstract
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The article is an attempt to describe the poet’s vision of human destiny, history and transcendence. Analysing poems from two poetry volumes I endeavour to present Busza’s philosophy. The poet notes and appreciates science and scientific achievements as well as civilisational development, although he realises that they may be dangerous for human spirituality and potentially lead to catastrophe.

Keywords: Andrzej Busza, transcendence, history, science

Andrzej Busza is a man of letters: poet, essayist, prose writer, translator, literary critic, historian of English literature and, last but not least, a Conradian. He is bilingual and situated culturally between numerous traditions and backgrounds\(^1\); “the notion of ‘inbetweenness’ fits his case perfectly”\(^2\). Busza’s life story seems to be a complete movie script, merely waiting to be filmed.

The poet was born in Kraków in 1938 and left Poland as a one-year-old child with his family just at the outbreak of the Second World War. Busza left Poland, but only physically, being in the Middle East he was plunged into new cultures, languages and traditions. However, at home he was surrounded by Polish culture, literature and tradition. Wit Tarnawski, Busza’s uncle, was a writer, critic and Conradian who introduced his nephew to Joseph Conrad and literature in general. This cultural and linguistic multiplicity at the very beginning of his life made it exceptional and unique forever.

In one of the interviews Busza said:
I grew up in a bubble of Polishness, in the Polish language. [...] But the landscape and reality of Palestine are still close to me today (...). Various traditions, cultures and languages were coming together here at that time. When I went shopping with Mum, for example to an Arab shop, French was the language of communication; in Jewish shops one would often use German. Moreover,

\(^1\) Including Poland, Palestine, the United Kingdom and Canada.

we rented rooms in a house also inhabited by Armenians. My Polish school was located in the so-called Greek colony. At home, Mum was helped by an Arab woman who had a son slightly older than me, so I learnt a little Arabic³.

Busza spent the war years in the Middle East. When he was nine his family moved to London. Between 1947 and 1965 the future writer lived, learned and studied in England. Busza received his Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in English literature from University College, London. During his school and academic years Busza lived parallel lives, between two traditions, two cultures and two languages. As Janusz Pasterski puts it, at school and university Busza was living in an English language environment, while at home in a Polish one. He had to switch cultural codes which resulted in a specific division, or a kind of spiritual and cultural balance: English was the language of professional and scientific issues while Polish was the language of family and personal life⁴.

For years I have lived and cultivated a schizophrenic mode of existence, speaking one language at home, and another in the street, the classroom, or the draughty departmental corridor. In the daytime I analysed sonnets by Shakespeare and Hopkins; at night I wrote poems in the language of Herbert, Różewicz, and Białoszewski⁵.

In 1965 Busza moved to Canada, where he taught English literature at the University of British Columbia until his retirement in 2004.

Busza is the author of eight volumes of poetry and several short stories. Together with Bogdan Czykowsk, Busza translated Polish poetry into English. He also published a Conradian monograph: Conrad’s Polish Literary Background and Some Illustrations of the Influence of Polish Literature on His Work as well as many articles on Conrad.

Busza’s early work is very strongly connected with the poet’s traumatic memories of his Palestinian childhood, with hard times he had at school in England and his life placed in-between two traditions, two cultures and two languages.

Busza wrote his first poems in Polish, it was natural for it was his first language. However writing in Polish was not related to Polish issues, Polish perspectives or Polish dilemmas, it was only a tool.

As Marian Kisiel and Janusz Pasterski describe it

The youngest of the Polish “London” poets, from the very beginning, had his own distinct path, with established formal and ethical bearings. He kept off the beaten track of much émigré writing, with its penchant for nostalgia and ideological commitment; he neither challenged its romantic legacy, nor contested its dominant myths. He wrote intellectual, tightly structured lyric poems, in a post-avant-garde vein, formally sophisticated, richly imagistic, ironic, and consciously drawing on various traditions⁶.

⁴ Pasterski, “Parallel Worlds”..., 44.
⁵ Quoted in Pasterski, “Parallel Worlds”..., 44.
The English language gradually became more and more “natural” for Busza, while Polish became, for him, a language of the past; he did not have a chance to use Polish on an everyday basis. In 1975 Busza published his poem “Kohelet” and then did not write poems for 26 years; it was a period of transformation and poetic silence. Busza eventually regained his poetic voice and started writing poems in English. Uniquely, however, “his poetry became more discursive and thematically more wide-ranging”, although “his virtual reader continues to be in essence Polish. He found his readership in Poland largely as ‘a poet in translation’. Most of his recent poetry has appeared either in translation or in bilingual editions”\(^7\).

I have chosen poems from two poetry collections: *Scenes from the Life of Laquedem* and *Full moon and summer solstice*\(^8\) which are representative of Andrzej Busza’s English period, the first collection introduces the reader into Busza’s poetic world and, imagery, and reveals his attitude towards art, history and time.

The second is a kind of a complement and addition to, and a continuation of, the first volume.

The author himself says\(^9\) that writing the poems which form *Scenes from the Life of Laquedem* was a very long process unless it took shape. As Busza recollects, the idea of creating the volume occurred to him during his stay in France (1977–1978), where he was a Visiting Professor in the Department of English and American Studies at the University of Nice. Whilst reading a series of articles in *Le Monde*, describing cities; the poet realised that the main motif of his life had been moving from place to place, from city to city. The volume was published in 2003.

Disapproving of extravagant subjectivism of artistic creation he decided to employ a collective protagonist, the persona of Laquedem, who represents those who cannot find their place on the Earth: refugee groups and victims of disasters for example. *In this way not only the protagonist of the poem but also time and place are in constant motion*\(^10\).

In *Scenes from the Life of Laquedem* Andrzej Busza joins the two dimensions (the real and spectral) into one\(^11\). The poet creates his own world: transposing not only his past experience, emotions and memories into the present time, but also seeking some logical and emotional connections between the past and the present. He artist also travels back in time. Busza plays with time and, changes its flow;

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\(^7\) Kisiel, Pasterski, “Foreword”, 12–13.

\(^8\) I discuss only the first part of the volume which contains Busza’s poems, the second contains Czaykowski’s works, (the title illustrates this division, *Full Moon* is a title of Czaykowski’s while *Summer Solstice* of Busza’s poems).

\(^9\) Andrzej Busza personal communication, August 1st, 2019.

\(^10\) Busza, personal communication, August 1st, 2019.

\(^11\) In my opinion, the poet somehow follows in Conrad’s footsteps; I had very similar connotations on the dimensions, time treatment while reading Conrad’s texts, see: “Joseph Conrad-Korzeniowski – an English writer with a Polish soul: Joseph Conrad’s Polish Heritage”. The article will be published in *Yearbook of Conrad Studies* 13, (2018); similar experience of both artists concerning living Poland, nomadic lifestyle, their rootedness in culture and tradition not in a physical place resulted in similar perceiving time, the past and the present, and much the same imagery.
History itself is an effect of spectrality. (...) Perhaps one should say, furthermore, that this spectrality belongs to what could be called a history in deferred time, a history in the play of writing, which has the structure (...) of an irreducible distension between the event and its recording\(^{12}\).

Busza writes about the world which does not exist anymore, about people who have passed away and things which have disappeared, about personal experiences and historical and mythical events. Everything is linked by Laquedem, who is a speaking voice of the volume. Izaak Laquedem, Cartaphilus, Ahaswer and, Giovanni Buttadeo these are all names of the Wandering Jew, a mythical undying man said to have insulted Jesus on the way to the Crucifixion and, who was cursed to walk the Earth until the Second Coming. Although his name (Laquedem) appears in the title of the collection, while speaking he uses the pronouns “us”, “we”, “our”, therefore he is not just an individual, he stands for all mankind, for those who cannot find their own place on the Earth. Busza returns to the past (his own and historical one) as if he wanted to “access [all his experiences] again in order to attempt changing them”\(^{13}\). The past becomes the present, everything is repeated over and over again, and there is no hope for humanity.

Laquedem presents six scenes, half symbolic, half real in regard to Busza’s biography and to human history. Gomorrah, Kraków, Jerusalem, London, Carthage, Babylon. The poet not only joins the past and the present, but also history and myth, personal and universal experience\(^{14}\). Each of the places reminds the reader about the historical catastrophe (sometimes it is enough to mention the name of the city in order to evoke in the reader certain associations, the name is employed as \textit{pars pro toto}). A synecdoche implies the mood of the poem and then the voice telling his story enhances the poem’s purport.

The motto of \textit{Scenes from the Life of Laquedem} is a quotation from Apollinaire, very meaningfully while linked with the persona of the collection (Laquedem)\(^{15}\):

\begin{quote}
Mon bateau partira demain...
Et je ne reviendrai jamais
My ship will sail tomorrow
And I will never return".
\end{quote}

The eponymous Laquedem will never find peace and quiet through his travels. All the cities presented in the scenes are unearthly, temporal and dangerous; they seem to offer something eternal and stable, but it is only illusion. In fact, nothing there can survive; everything is fragile and evanescent. The atmosphere is either deprived of all human


\(^{15}\) This and subsequent quotations from \textit{Scenes from the Life of Laquedem} I cite using printouts of the poems received from Andrzej Busza via email. The poetry volume was a bibliophile edition not available in Poland at present.
emotions and feelings (“Babylon”) or there are only negative affections (“Jerusalem”, “Gomorrah”, “Kraków”, “London”, “Carthage”). On the one hand, there are sterile and perfectly dehumanised objects and devices; even nature is not natural, and divinity is virtual rather than spiritual (“Babylon”). On the other, the atmosphere of the poems is unearthly, haunted, as even nature has acted against people (“Jerusalem”, “Gomorrah”). Anthropomorphism and personification, along with laconic imagery, convey a climate of pervasive fear and danger. There are idyllic moments in the protagonist’s life, but only to spell an inevitable disaster. Bitter irony allows the persona to show nonsense and the pathos of existence in such a world.

“and so we came to Babylon
and everyone built a tower
of their own

strong sturdy
foundations firmly
gripping gravity

able to withstand
lighting-bolts cyclones
even the sporadic jetliner
(...)
we have virtual pets
and partners

the best minds are currently working
on a virtual divinity

we will not move again

since we are everywhere
and nowhere
we won’t need to (»Babylon«)

Jerusalem
city of childhood nightmares
of the azure and gold watercolour
(...)

where bread loaves
turn to stone
or are stuffed with explosives

where stones crawl silently up hillsides

down

then roll down after nightfall into the valley of Hinnom (“Jerusalem”).

Babylon, a biblical symbol of corruption and tyranny, is real, people are still busy building it. Now it is perhaps more technically advanced but the feeling of loneliness, unrootedness and dehumanisation prevails. As Ross Labrie points out, the biblical city in Busza’s poem,

“a symbol of superior technology in its own time, is here linked with Manhattan and in particular with the World Trade Center. The symbol of Babylon stands for a specious claim to individuality (...) The inhabitants of the modern Babylon live collectively (...) there is no need to reach outside of the technocracy that encloses them (...) For this reason there is no need, the narrator assures us ironically, to look elsewhere since all needs will be seen to and all questions answered”.

Busza sums up the poem, Babylon is just a vision of a postmodern metropolis.

In the poem “Jerusalem” past and present are intertwined. The reader travels back in time, to Busza’s early childhood. The time spent by the poet in Jerusalem was a period in which terrorism escalated in the city. As an eight-year-old child he could have been killed in Jerusalem, in the King David Hotel bombing (a terrorist attack on Monday, July 22, 1946) where 91 people lost their lives, and many were injured. Busza and his family were meant to go to the cafe in the hotel at the time of attack, yet Andrzejek did not want to; the family went home and, as a consequence, they all survived. However, it was a traumatic experience for the boy as he witnessed the result of the bombing (corpses which were removed from the hotel). The trauma of that day has accompanied the poet all his life. Beata Tarnowska rightly suggests that

“[T]he traumatic events that Busza witnessed, as well as his living in a multicultural environment, (became) a source of his later ambivalent attitude towards life in general. On the one hand, the remaining sense of unrootedness, as well as “hidden catastrophism” (...) On the other (...) openness and positive cosmopolitism. The same ambivalence is expressed in Busza’s work in which Jerusalem is both his own city and the alien and dangerous one”.

Cathy Caruth claims that to be traumatized is “to be ‘possessed by an image or event’ located in the past. (...) Trauma (…) is forever engaged in the quest for

16 Ross Labrie, “Reading Andrew Busza’s English Poems”, in Kontynenty..., 60.
17 Andrzej Busza personal communication, August 1st, 2019.
18 “Andrzejek” is a diminutive of Busza’s first name – Andrzej.
19 Beata Tarnowska, “‘Dym koloru ochry’ Jerozolima Andrzeja Buszy”, in Kontynenty..., 104.
an answer, an evanescent truth. Such is the case with ghosts that arrive from the past, seeking to establish an ethical dialogue with the present. Such a dialogue can be observed in “Jerusalem” as well as in other scenes (within the volume). In Laquedem’s stories history permeates the present, they continually intermingle. Laquadem is a guide leading us from general to personal history, from one city to another and from one calamity to another one, making us listen to the ghosts of the past.

Here and there autobiographical elements or elements having their origins in collective family mythology can be seen through a more distant epic texture (“Kraków”, “Jerusalem”) 21.

“snuggled
in Michalik’s cavern
we sipped Käfe mit Schlag
perhaps nibbled madeleines

when the doorboy
stumbling down steps
of crimson frayed carpet
cried

come come look look up
at the sky (Kraków).”

“London” was initially planned as a poem embedded in modern history. At the beginning Busza thought about his childhood memories. On the future poet’s arrival in England in 1947 he saw the dome of St Paul’s Cathedral in London surrounded by debris against the smoke, a result of the wartime bombing. However later, Busza decided to place the city in times of the Great Fire of 1666.

“down Love Lane
and Fish Street
in corners and upon steeples
between churches and houses
howling and cracking
dread flames leapt

fire drops rained
casements melted and buckled
molten lead flowed down runnels
glowing with fiery redness

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20 Quoted in María del Pilar Blanco & Esther Peeren, op.cit.
21 Andrzej Busza personal communication, August 1st, 2019
four great fires
galloped to gossip
at the corner of Cheapside

the city burned
    under its burnished lid of smoke” (London).
In other Scenes the Great History interferes with Everyman’s life:
“we settled in the market quarter
worked for and with them
they granted us a chartered plot
in the corner of the necropolis
among almond and olive groves

yet their Qart Hadasht
was not our last city

we knew that one day
there would come
screaming out of the sun

a raptor in leather
with steel and fire
perhaps an eye-patch
Scipio Alaric Rommel

and drive us back
    into wilderness and desert” (Carthage)

Janusz Pasterski notices that “Scenes from the Life of Laquedem are not only another
version of Ahaswer’s topos but its reinterpretation in a postmodern context, a universal
reflection on a need for being rooted and for community”22. The volume describes what
happens to people when they lose a sense of safety and security. In such a situation
a sense of belonging and rootedness becomes the most important, for it allows an individual to define himself and, to keep his identity. Busza writes about the primary needs
in a laconic way, juxtaposing pictures and scenes, speaking voices and perspectives.
His persona is rooted in culture and tradition; such values, although elusive and fragile,
are the only constant in life. Irony is Busza’s sole weapon against the horrors of history;
the reader receives a clear poetic picture, terse but by dint of it very moving and expressive. The poet is not an optimist. He realises that people are corrupt and weak, destroying their own achievements on their way to destruction. Trapped in a vicious circle,

22 Janusz Pasterski, “Posłowie”, 237. (translation mine)
man cannot change his destiny; tragic history repeats itself over and over again. There is no hope for humanity unless people reject the technocracy which has trapped them and the “material interests” ruling their lives. In order to survive, humanity has to turn toward spiritual reality, non-material values and tradition: “virtual divinity” cannot save them.

In the course of time, metaphysical reflection and transcendence of life and death become more and more distinct and visible in Busza’s works. Pasterski claims that the core of Busza’s philosophy is the agnostic “I do not know”, which is especially conspicuous in the works discussing existential issues. I would like to examine *The third testament*, from the “Full moon and summer solstice” volume.

*The third testament* is preceded by a very unusual motto (even in the case of Busza – the erudite and a very demanding poet who expects his readers to understand his language, literary, philosophical and historical hints and allusions, this one may seem mysterious at first sight).

> “Hwaet ic swena cealdost secgan wille / hwaet me gemaetteto midre nihte” (in modern English “Listen! The choicest of visions I wish to tell / which came as a dream in middle-night”)24. The motto is taken from “The Dream of the Rood”, one of the oldest works in Old English, which presents a dream of the cross that tells the history of the crucifixion from its own perspective. Such a motto automatically introduces the reader into a Christian perspective and makes them consider the dogma of Christianity while listening to the persona of the poem. On the other hand, it also creates awareness that such reflections have accompanied humankind from the dawn of Christian civilisation, that they are as old as the hills.

> “Once
in the middle of a dark night
I dreamt that God had died”.

Busza presents the vision of Jesus’s death from the perspective of a modern Intensive Care Unit: instead of the cross, the reader sees only the wounded body of God slowly dying

> “Until vital signs
on green monitors
levelled out
to a state of total entropy (“The Third Testament”)25.

The poet notices and appreciates science and scientific achievements, as well as civilisational development, although he realises that they may be dangerous for human spirituality. Ewa Bartos rightly points out that the scientific approach toward Good’s death results in killing God with the scientific theory (I wanted to say that scientific

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theory somehow kills God), there is no place for the mystery of God or of the Universe. The atrophy of transcendence in human reflection deprives people of their values and metaphysics. The TV set, a modern prophet takes the place of God\textsuperscript{26}.

Busza alludes to various philosophical ideas, scientific theories and cultural traditions, juxtaposing them with the vision of a future world deprived of God\textsuperscript{27}. Such a world will not be happier or better, it will be inhuman, earthbound and, devoid of any higher feelings or lofty goals.

“Let us rejoice then
gaudeamus igitur
for there is now
neither up nor down
Gibt es noch ein Oben
und ein Unten
und gibt kein Grund mehr

For being is a jackpot
and one glorious nanosecond
the universal star-studded carpet
of space and time
rolled out
just like that
at the whim
of Schrödinger’s Cheshire cat
(…)
While singly
each one of us
can wallow now
in their nutshell
of bliss and free foreplay
until nightfall
when there awaits us
like ants and moles
in a little black hole
with all our works and days
nox una perpetua dormienda
without angst dread or sorge

\textsuperscript{26} Ewa Bartos, “Mikrokosmologia. O poetyckiej wyobraźni Andrzeja Buszy”, in Kontynenty..., 185–188.
\textsuperscript{27} To mention only a few from The Third Testament: The Big Bang Theory, the second law of thermodynamics (Rudolf Clausius), the heat death of the universe (Hermann von Helmholtz), Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, Schrödinger’s cat (paradox), Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophical concept “God is dead”, Late Roman Republic poetry (Busza quotes a line by Gaius Valerius Catullus on life and death); see also: E. Bartos, “Mikrokosmologia. O poetyckiej wyobraźni Andrzeja Buszy”, 183–188.
after our sparrow’s flight
through a golden beam

But we need fear
no dreams
neither good nor bad
for God is dead
Alleluja Amen”²⁸

The persona in Busza’s poem seeks the truth about himself, the world and the Universe. In such a case the question concerning the existence of God becomes fundamental. By accepting God’s death, people do not gain freedom or absolute felicity, they simply lose their direction in life (for there is now / neither up nor down). As Labrie rightly notices,

“[i]ndeed, without this needed direction we are reduced to the primitive life of animals – ‘like ants and moles’ given over to our physical drivers. (...) Moreover, for Busza the loss of the voice of Christ presages a loss of direction for the whole Western culture (...)”²⁹

Labrie also points out that lack of the cross in the scene of the dying Christ is very meaningful; in the past the image of the lancing of Christ’s body on the cross was familiar to Western people, though nowadays it is no longer a familiar sight.

Possessed knowledge of the condition of humanity does not allow the persona to be optimistic or does not elevate his spirit but makes the speaker more and more pessimistic, sceptical and ironic. “The third testament” is the quest for God in a dehumanised world.

Bibliography:


²⁹ Labrie, “Reading Andrew Busza’s English Poems”, 60.
³⁰ Labrie, „Reading Andrew Busza’s English Poems”, 61.


