The Infernal Nature of the Inner World: Literary and Philosophical Discoveries of Stanisław Przybyszewski and Tadeusz Miciński

Abstract

The article examines literature’s intersection with philosophy and religion as illustrated by the theme of the discovery of the infernal nature of the inner human world, based on selected texts by Stanisław Przybyszewski and Tadeusz Miciński. The two writers sought to explore a transcendent reality, and also an infernal one.

Keywords: evil, infernal, mysticism, Gnosticism, spirituality

1.

In considering the phenomenology of evil and the infernal in European culture, one cannot ignore the philosophy of Origen¹, the key scholar of the early Christian church, who in On First Principles recorded the following reflections: “Departing from good is nothing else than forming yourself in evil. The lack of good is certainly evil. Hence it also happens that someone falls into evil to the same extent he has deviated from good” (Orygenes 1996, 198) It follows that only good dominates in reality, and distancing oneself from it results in evil. At the same time, it is not an equal opponent competing for good, but only for its absence. In this way, Origen creates a paradigm of rational reflection on the essence of evil, within which the inquiries of Saint Augustine and Leibniz are located. Those two thinkers expanded upon valuable aspects of Origen’s conceptual thinking, and compounded its imperfections². While this article is not a detailed analysis of the various versions of theodicy, it is worth noting that in their intellectual detachment, Saint Augustine and Leibniz overlook the emotional side of dealing with evil. Yet it can be fully appreciated when reading the texts of mystics, who sometimes described instances of direct, spiritual knowledge of the infernal world. The following excerpt from the spiritual autobiography of Mother Teresa Marchocka (1603–1652) is an example:

¹ On the multifaceted teaching of Origen see, for example: Jocz (2000)
² On the limitations of the philosophy of evil of Saint Augustine and Leibniz see, for example: Jocz (2007).
Once having prayed on hell, I imagined one terrible place in hell with such inspiration: “You deserved this place, and you would be in it, if God did not take you out of the world, but you should also be afraid now if you led an evil life here”. My God seized me and stopped me from running into my own doom [...] (Górski 1939, 70–71).

In this account, the Polish Carmelite nun is convinced of the authentic nature of her spiritual experience of hell. William James notes that mystics are usually absolutely sure of the truth of their experiences. The most interesting part of Teresa Marchacka’s statement is the role of the imagination in the experience she describes. It is this that brings the mystical cognition of a transcendent reality to the fore. In this way, it is also possible to build a bridge between mystical experience and literary inner worlds.

Perhaps it was for this reason that there was a tendency among writers and critics to emphasize the role of literature, which explores the nature of being but is not subject to the strict control of religious orthodoxy. There are many works in the history of European thought that have sought to identify the human spirit’s involvement with religion. These include Hegel’s work on the relation between philosophy and religion. However, differing cultural beliefs mean that cognition gained through religious experience is not entirely unequivocal. Jan Stur’s interpretation of the phenomenology of Tadeusz Miciński’s work shows that:

Excessive unevenness separates the bard of Poland and humanity from a mystic, who also tried to solve the problem of being, but did not penetrate the abyss of hell to the bottom and did not make a synthetic arc like Miciński, leading us from Kniaz Patiomkin through Nietota towards the definitive wisdom and unshakable love of Father Faust. (Stur 1919, 42)

In this quote, the belief that only literature (especially Miciński’s works) is suitable for representing spiritual struggles with the reality of the infernal deserves special attention. Key to demonstrating the limitless potential of literary creation to explore hellish, transcendent worlds is comparison of Miciński’s texts with similar work by Stanisław Przybyszewski. In the “Frontispice” for a new edition of De profundis (1900), Przybyszewski stated that the study of spiritual, transcendent reality was the basis of his artistic oeuvre.

II.

Stanisław Przybyszewski, in reflecting on the ontological foundations of discovering spiritual reality (and its infernal dimension), writes the following passage in Powrotna fala. Naokoło Ekspresjonizmu:

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8 See: Przybyszewski (1929).
The externality, appearance, the overt shape was rejected, the testimony of the senses, as completely false, ceased to be considered, all formulas and recipes were broken – the most realistic fact was what was happening in myself. [...] Impressions, coming from outside, are only a pretext and irritation – the only truth is one’s own self and one’s own emotional states. (Przybyszewski 1918 b, 171)

In formulating thus a diagnosis of the current state of art, Przybyszewski focuses his attention mainly on the postulate of a radical break with the tendency to artistic appreciation of sensuality, materiality, and physicality. Therefore the creator should focus primarily on exploring the nature of his self. On the other hand, the physical world can be a catalyst for internal experiences. Of course, this should be equated in no way with narcissistic adoration of spiritual potencies of the human self. Measurable effects become a work of art, the experience of which the artist perceives as a kind of religious act. Przybyszewski indicates the nature of this phenomenon in Sny na jawie:

Every artist has the gift of Seeing, and Art is nothing more than the form and shapes of the earth embodied in seeing things beyond the past. Art as well as religion is the strongest bond that connects man with the “blind” world, which the artist, like the prophet, penetrates, sees and makes visible. (Przybyszewski 1918 a, 66)

Thus, the way to understand the essence of transcendent reality is by examining the depths of the human self. In this way, Przybyszewski sets entirely maximalist goals before artistic creativity. But how can an artistic (literary) work actualize its potency to explicate such “non-historical things”? The answer is the application of the imagination, but one should bear in mind that there are certain limitations to this. Al-Gazali, the Arab mystic, stated that the imagination enables the creation of symbols that should refer people to transcendent reality. Alternatively such symbols may focus the creator’s attention primarily on himself, effectively obscuring this reality. According to Al-Gazali the imagination provides entry to the spiritual world: “At the same time, this imagination can become as transparent as glass, which, thanks to its transparency, does not obstruct light, but on the contrary helps it to pass through, protecting it from excess winds” (Gazali 1990, 44). Referring to the metaphor of glass and light, Al-Gazali suggests that the necessary condition for spiritual cognition is the shaping of the human imagination. It should bring man closer to transcendent beings, and also constitute a barrier effectively eliminating any potential distortions of mystical perception. How does Przybyszewski visualize the “extraordinary things” he describes in Sny na jawie? Can this kind of literature compete with mystical experience?

In order to answer such questions it is worth starting with a visionary, hallucinatory quotation from Przybyszewski’s Krzyk:

The planks of the floor began to move, to lift upwards, and from the gap between the two planks appeared a monstrous centipede, atrocious, disgusting, so shockingly hideous that his blood chilled with disgust and revulsion. He saw how the hideous worm began to crawl with hundreds

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9 See: Gazali (1990, 44).
of legs around the entire empty room – he saw it disappear into other gaps, and appear again [...] and Gasztowt knew now that it would show again and that wherever he moved he would see it everywhere, it is omnipresent and omnipotent, and wherever he wants to hide, the centipede will find him everywhere. (Przybyszewski 1917, 160)

The reader will conclude that this monstrous insect is a metaphor for the morbid and sloppy growth of the city. However, this does not in any way change its ontological status. In the world Przybyszewski creates in the novel, it is a projection of the painter Gasztowt’s self. The protagonist is well aware that the centipede haunting him cannot be a sentient entity. In physical reality there are teleologically ordered relations between matter and form, and the aggressive insect gives the impression that it is not subject to them. This is evidenced by his ability to expand in a chaotic manner, unhampered by an insect form, and completely appropriate all available space. Then Gasztowt loses his existential security. A dark bond has been established between the man and the demonic centipede. The vision of the insect is not a single event. It appears as an integral part of the painter’s self. The prospect of this kind of spiritual, psychological dependence and enslavement is more terrifying than the hideous, nightmarish figure of a worm. The ever constant presence of the insect is simply unbearable. Is it to be considered an example of the literary and philosophical discovery of the inner world, or as a manifestation of transcendent reality? It should be remembered here that Czerkaski, the main character in the trilogy Synowie ziemi, experiences similarly repulsive visions. Czerkaski, too, has an encounter with a disgusting messenger from beyond sentient reality. According to Wojciech Gutowski the spider epiphany is a satanic manifestation. To elaborate, it is worth considering Il regno doloroso (1924), filled with its air of perversion. In this novel, the passage that follows shows that seeking transcendent reality can lead to an encounter with the infernal world:

And strange: De Lancre, who did not recognize any God, and even despised him as an extremely vulgar means of the Church to keep the mob in check, he, a follower of the Cathar teachings that if there is a God then it is probably one who could not have anything to do with this poor creation that is a material being, he feared Satan, and for him all hidden powers were Satan, it was all invisible to human eyes, and yet existing in reality quite differently than all this here, on earth. (Przybyszewski 1924, 126)

The reader is first of all surprised by the syncretic spirituality manifested by the protagonist of the novel. He is deeply convinced of dualistic Catharism, and of the existence of mysterious and hostile powers. Their reality, however, has nothing to do with

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10 On the essence of this metaphor and the modernist discourse on the repulsive nature of the city, see, for example: Popiel (1995), Jocz (2009a, 42–45).
12 On the phenomenon of the demonic world in Il regno doloroso see, for example: Jocz (2012b), Jocz (2014).
any corporeality. De Lancre was terrified by the sentient elusiveness of the creatures. On the other hand, he was unappreciative of the material world in Qatari. Perhaps for this reason he did not deny the existential authenticity of entities that do not have an intimate nature. At the same time, the quoted passage shows De Lancre to be clearly afraid of these forces. However, as the narrative continues, he seeks to get closer to them to experience their presence. De Lancre desires to cross the threshold of material life. De Lancre, deciding to “open the gates to this, for the senses of his hidden world” (Przybyszewski 1924, 129) consults a book of magical spells and subsequently undergoes an incredibly realistic vision in which he is besieged by disgusting, demonic creatures. The macabre and the infernal are manifested primarily through visualizations of bodily distortions and anomalies. While creating this literary world, Przybyszewski repeatedly emphasizes his anti-material, gnostic concerns, but at the same time is well aware that people are repelled by bodily degradation. Thus the domestic nature of transcendent spiritual reality has been revealed through the use of sensual symbols. The narrative requires constant reader assurance that the experience being described takes place only in De Lancre’s inner world. Therefore, the next section of Il regno doloroso is an ontological diagnosis:

and slowly he felt his brain begin to move back to his head, and suddenly he felt – awake! […] He was amazed to the highest degree how he could see the signs and read the words of the spell when there was the deepest darkness around him, so that he could not see the hand in front of his eyes. (Przybyszewski 1924, 132–133).

This passage confirms that the experience of infernal transcendence being described takes place in the immanent reality of the human self, and is also a manifestation of liberation from the dictates of the body.

That is why De Lancre experiences a literal reencounter with material limitations. In order to confirm gnostic deprecation of human physicality, it is worth discussing the next section of Il regno doloroso. One of the interrogated witches asserts: “If this is what you call Delort here, you have to know that this is the bag in which the proper Delort is stuck. […] – It means that my body is a coffin from which I can come out when I want and fold myself back to it when I want” (Przybyszewski 1924, 180). Employing gnostic concepts, Przybyszewski strengthened the anti-material message of his novel and saturated it with a darkly noble mood, which specifically suppressed and silenced the moral excesses described within it. The reader is presented with an imperfect visualization of the spiritual struggles of man. This is similar to the description of Gasztowt’s visions.

The shock value of this passage serves to disrupt the reader’s complacency as situated in the sensual world. The narrative’s disturbing nature produces great anxiety in the reader. Such experiences are conducive to a gnostic, metaphysical awakening. Przybyszewski does not provide a solution – his literature (gnostic in spirit) does not proffer hope. Polish literature seeks not to soothe, but to investigate human experience.

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14 On the writer’s interest in Gnosticism, see: Przybyszewski (1929), Jocz (2009a).
III.

With Jan Stur’s statement from above in mind, we can consider Przybyszewski’s work on infernal reality in relation to Tadeusz Miciński’s thinking. Miciński also invests his poetic visualization with metaphysical tensions drawn from gnostic tradition. These tensions in the writer’s texts are evidenced by the character Choerina’s statement in the drama *W mrokach złotego pałacu, czyli Bazilissa Teofanu. Tragedja z dziejów Bizancjum X wieku* (1909):

> In the highlands resides the depth – Bythos. It has the power of universal existence, it is a quintessential thought and joyful tastes at the same time. There also is Silence. But the unattainable depths are eternal silence – and the attainable have become a word – an act of the will, which has produced eons. The last eon is the Sofia-Wisdom. But it wanted to view the Great Depth directly and descended into it without restraint. (Miciński 1909, 201–202)

This use of complicated Valentinian mythology connects Miciński with Przybyszewski in a previously unrecognized way. From the passage above it follows that lying at the root of Sofia’s rebellion and the birth of evil is both the desire to gain the gnostic of Being Perfect, and incredible, self-destructive pride. Through pride, the sinful eon became convinced that it was possible to fully know the Absolute. It is evident that Miciński used this Valentinian sophiology to interpret Theophane’s behavior artistically, adapting that figure from Byzantium’s turbulent history. Theophane, by rebelling against the Christian foundations of civilization and pursuing unlimited power and gnosis, ultimately loses his battle for influence within the empire. Facing political defeat, Sofia, the drama’s protagonist, realizes that she only faces a life sentence in a convent. Her inner spiritual struggle is illustrated in this excerpt:

> In my stone cell the walls are cold and damp – no sound from the world has access there. I enter through a small, narrow door, obeying only my spell. Oh death, you are the awakening of cosmic waves and storms! Blow me from the tree of life as a golden autumn leaf with a metallic sound soaring across the mountains of Mystery! A fiery aurora, slayer of a life indolent in its thoughtlessness, be beloved! Let dominion be holy over passion, over pain, over sadness and longing, let your black wings rustle. […] I am nearing your gates, Lucifer! (Miciński 1909, 233)

To fully understand this passage’s meaning, it must be pointed out that Theophane can no longer hope to return to power. Therefore, “the door obeying the spell” can be seen as a metaphor for entering the inner world, which will become her final asylum. This alternative reality does not bring the prospect of spiritual liberation from a hellacious temporal prison, however. Instead, it provides a foretaste of the next infernal circle. Bazilissa does not expect any reward for the fight against God. The intent is final destruction and an annihilating union with the Luciferian evil.

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16 On this peculiar historiography of Miciński see, for example: Ziejka (1979, 275–301).
In describing the tendency of his literary characters to sink into their own infernal existences, Miciński discovered the extraordinary, hallucinatory world of Xiądz Faust. In this novel, one participates in moving, spiritual meetings among the main characters within a ghostly reality transcending the material world. Jan Stur has introduced readers to the nature of these specific accounts. Stur noted that in Xiądz Faust pneumatic beings’ cognition always takes place through the inner human domain. He formulated his theory as follows:

Three-fourths of its “surface” are used to nourish the soul in the body, which owes changeless obedience to natural law, and one-fourth (imagine a square!) borders on the Superconscious, that is, on the sphere of free Spirit, unknown to us. This is evidenced by apparitions faced by Father Faust. […] “earthly” abilities are lethargic and drowsy, and forces that flow from there awaken, hidden perhaps in the earthly soul but only functional after bodily oppression diminishes. (Stur 1919, 125)

It must be stated that the gnostic narrator in Miciński’s literary world stigmatizes the body, which in his view is an obvious barrier to spiritual activity. This does not mean that human physicality prevents that activity entirely, however. The soul, after all, participates perpetually in transcendent reality. The perception of a kind of substantial bond with spiritual beings has been present throughout European culture for centuries, of course. A key example is Origen’s considerations in teaching the human spirit’s everlasting unity with God\(^\text{17}\). By creating such images, Miciński reinterprets these beliefs through neo-gnostic conceptual categories extant in Polish cultural and literary exchange due to the reception of Carl du Prel, Edouard Schuré, and Rudolf Steiner and their spiritual peregrinations\(^\text{18}\). Those ideas resulted in literary works, and in individual spiritual ventures conducted by Stanisława Hausnerowa and others\(^\text{19}\).

An example of Stur’s literary formulation is the “Dolina mroku” chapter in Xiądz Faust. In it, the reader observes the protagonist falling into a kind of lethargy, and then forces of the Superconscious become activated. The effects of these actions are presented as follows:

The power of my hatred held sway over the space, unconsciously guiding my hand – and I was murdering someone far away – here – in the shadows of a speeding train. I couldn’t see his face – until I suddenly saw my spirit lift the severed head by the hair. And I no longer want to bother asking the sphinx how the headless corpse was located in the locked chamber? The one that was alone – a thousand miles distant. (Miciński, 1913, 108–109)

According to this passage, murder is possible from a safe remove, by means of a spiritual double. The human traveling in the train has no actual influence over

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\(^{19}\) See Hausnerowa (1918).
the spiritual killer’s actions. According to Stur, only “one-fourth” of the human soul yearns to commit crimes. In that essence the criminal impulse arises, which the body and its “‘earthly’ abilities” can’t control. At the same time, however, the body remains substantially connected with its pneumatic element. So the protagonist, in effect, cannot cut himself off from murderous propensities of his spiritual nature. In the reality Miciński created, most painful for a human being would be cessation of the Superconscious. He must therefore live with those consequences of an act that occurred with no conscious, willful participation. It would be hard to find a more infernal experience.

Another experience of transcendent reality is the meeting of Father Faust’s meeting with the Lady of Care’s specter, demonstrating her powers:

On he whom I lay my hand, the entire world can’t help.

Neither does the sun rise or set in a flood’s dark clouds. Though sense rules with its full force, darkness descends in the depths of the soul.

[…] Goal is postponed for the next day, awaiting future turns – never ready to be itself.

[…] Half free, half shackled, half napping, half intermittent, sleep binds him, weakens him and prepares him for hell. (Miciński, 1913, 271–272)

On first reading, the impression is that the mysterious specter’s pronouncements don’t contain the same destructive charge as Bazilissa’s spiritual self-destruction. However, it clearly infects Faust with the paralyzing toxin of “failure”\(^\text{20}\). The priest’s powerlessness seems even more damaging than Theophane’s deliberate choice. The Byzantine empress maintains her freedom of will, still able to oppose even God’s omnipotence. Her actions, however, always emanate strength and determination. Meanwhile, Faust’s will is gradually, systematically constrained and finally rendered incapable of resisting the Lady of Care’s domination. Strength manifests in this slow “darkening of the soul”. At first, this doesn’t seem dangerous, but it rapidly leads to spiritual paralysis, that is, a state of “semi-freedom”. Faust will remain “half shackled” – total bondage, that is to say, will elude him. Among the demonic creatures, the Lady of Care occupies a unique position. In the first place, there is none of the violent aggression that characterizes figures in Przybyszewski’s literary world. That world also lacks the spiritual possessiveness of Lucifer, to whose whim the despairing Theophane is subordinated. She is characterized by an extraordinary perfidy, however: she can restrain her desire for power over a human being, thus casting a lull on their vigilance. Faust falls into a kind of lethargy, preventing him from rebelling effectively and ensuring his descent to hell. This negative perception of sleep is characterized by a kind of gnostic sensitivity\(^\text{21}\).

\(^{20}\) In the poem “Niedokonany”, the category of “imperfection” seems related to the fate of the main character, Kuszenie Chrystusa Pana na pustyni. More on its role in the poem can be found in, for example: Jocz (2009c, 91–156).

\(^{21}\) On this subject, see for example: Jocz (2001).
IV.

Do Stanisław Przybyszewski’s and Tadeusz Miciński’s literary creations support their authors’ philosophical reflections on evil and the infernal? Can fiction compete with mystical experience? The reader doesn’t get unambiguous answers indicating the evil’s genesis or ontological status, yet is able to observe its destructive power. Authorial compassion for their suffering characters advocates against the toxic allure of the infernal. It is the latter that awakens De Lancre’s irresponsible curiosity, seduces Theophane with Luciferean illusions and dominates Faust’s will. At the same time, art represents the inherently ruthless nature of evil. That is embodied in Przybyszewski’s centipede. The writers cited in this article render their artistic visions through gnosticism and neo-gnosticism. Gnostic tradition does not strive to place evil within the eternal order of things, but does warn against its infernal paralysis. By understanding the notion of evil in this way, these writers provide an extremely successful visualization of it. While their works may seem symptomatic of perverse fascination with that power, they may also be treated as dramatic warnings.

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22 See: Jocz (2012a).


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