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**BIBLICAL TRACES IN THE POETRY  
OF ANNA POGONOWSKA**

**Giemza L.**

Biblical references and a grim touch of war experiences pervade Anna Pogonowska's poetry. The religious character of her work is primarily reminiscent of the New Testament. However, the presence of religion in the poetess' works is rather alluding and ambiguous. Pogonowska often reflects on the progress of civilization by combining biblical themes and problems of modernity into her poetic imagery.

**Keywords:** Anna Pogonowska, poetry, religion, Bible, Biblical traces.

**БИБЛЕЙСКИЕ СЛЕДЫ  
В ПОЭЗИИ АННЫ ПОГОНОВСКОЙ**

**Гемза Л.**

Библейские отсылки и мрачный оттенок военного опыта пронизывают поэзию Анны Погоновской. Религиозный характер ее произведений в первую очередь напоминает Новый Завет. Однако присутствие религии в творчестве поэтессы довольно намекающее и двусмысленное. Погоновская часто размышляет о прогрессе цивилизации, объединяя в своих поэтических образах библейские темы и проблемы современности.

**Ключевые слова:** Анна Погоновская, поэзия, религия, Библия, библейские следы.

Little is said about Anna Pogonowska's poetry, and if it is said, it is usually in the context of relations with Norwid, opposition to Przyboś and domination of the natural world. Born in 1922 in Lodz, she can be treated as one of the voices of "the generation of Apocalypse fulfilled", a generation that entered adulthood and a mature creative age at the outbreak of World War II.

In wartime as a young girl she was displaced from her family home and later hired as a forest worker, to eventually settle down in the grim reality of the

contemporary Warsaw. There she witnessed the Warsaw Uprising. A glimpse of these experiences is offered in the poem “Occupation youth” (“Młodość okupacyjna”), where she recalls:

*I lived in Warsaw since Easter. In my cramped  
Room I would count my days' wages. My boss was bringing down  
The ghetto's carcass [...].  
I, on the other hand, gnawed on dry slices of bread,  
Stole fat from the pantry, fearing not of the afterlife [5, s. 7].*

In this short glance one can sense what happened to the entire generation: not only did their historical experience change how they perceived the world, but also their perception of religiosity and morality. “Sinning” (stealing fat) is no longer unequivocally wrong; it is no longer sanctioned by the fear of God. This problem is of particular personal interest in Pogonowska’s poetry: the religious imagination, also quite evident in biblical clues, changes rapidly under the effect of historical events and civilization changes.

After the war, she studied Polish at the University of Lodz, and at that time she began to write and publish. In 1963 she moved with her husband to Warsaw, where she lived until her death in 2005. She published, among others, in “Bonds” (“Więź”), “Poetry” (“Poezja”) and “Creativity” (“Twórczość”). In 1979, she received a St. Brother Albert award.

Certainly, many threads of her work pertain to the typical voices of their time, which may explain the current lack of wider interest, but at the same time it is full of non-obvious, dramatic questions, redefinitions, attempts at re-evaluation, and as such, it requires re-reading.

Katarzyna Kuczyńska-Koschany wrote about her: “Staff’s patronage is, of course, significant. This is not a debut of the constructivist avant-garde, it is poetry that appreciates tradition, draws from it in handfuls, and then – within the limits of its register – experiments. But also it was written after Leśmian’s creative reading [...], to whom Pogonowska devoted her monographic MA thesis, defended in 1950 at the

University of Lodz. And at the same time, as it immediately turns out – in the first poems written during the occupation – this is severely post-war poetry” [7, s. 130].

Anna Pogonowska makes her debut in the press in 1945 her debut volume “Knots” (“Węzły”) is published in 1948. It is worth adding, following Katarzyna Kuczyńska-Koschany again, that this debut was received with great reserve by both Catholic and official critics, thus remaining in the socio-realist trend at that time. The last volume published during the poet’s lifetime “Shinning Existence” dates from 1992. She died in 2005 in Warsaw. In the only published book of essays, which is partly a self-commentary to her own work, she stated: “Only by means of poems can I find things of importance. Only knowing that I am creating a poetic measure, do I gain the courage to deal with the pressure of reality” [6, s. 82].

If we want to write about biblical leads, we feel obliged to explain what prompts us to take up this topic. After all, in the author’s poetry “Bonds” they are neither particularly frequent nor, perhaps, exceptionally expressive. At the same time, however, the poet, from some point in her poetic path, exhibits a religious attitude, and in this context, it is worth taking a closer look at her reading of the books of the Bible. It is difficult to find any clear hints in the aforementioned essays, there is only one short entry, in addition, in the part entitled “Fragments”, and it retains such fragmentary, i.e. broken, non-grammatical character.

The hypothesis of God as the goal of love, according to Leon Bloy as the beggar of love. Is this a model of the gospel? – the road to such an absolute idea is to contradict all predatory instincts of life. So a denial of life?

*Searching for God in people. In oneself. A beggar.*

*And the opponent – offers the body* [6, s. 82].

Despite the jerky manner of expression based on nominal sentences, it is possible to capture the essential, personalistic tone. God is in a loving relationship with us, and Pogonowska uses a blunt word, after Bloy, “beggar of love” to describe it. It is a metaphor that inverts our traditional thinking about God: a beggar is someone at the bottom of the social ladder, powerless and unnoticed, waiting for a gesture from those who pass him by.

In the following points I would like to outline the most important problems related to the presence of the Bible in the poetry of the author of “Armor”:

1. The first thing that draws attention is the domination of the New Testament threads. References to the Old Testament, if they appear, are rather ornamental, with a staff age of ready-made meanings.

2. Secondly, at least some quotations from the Bible are accompanied by an updating interpretation, fitting in with the historical experience of man in the second half of the 20th century with his characteristic fears, hopes and desires. They would primarily be apocalyptic in nature.

3. The third issue is the deeply allusive nature of many references – in some poems, we can find distant biblical reminiscences, however, such reading requires careful question marks.

4. Our fourth and the last hypothesis, which is superior to the previous ones, and we also approach it with great caution, would be as follows: Pogonowska’s poetry is symbolically stretched between the events of Mount Tabor and Mount Calvary, between the transfiguration and complete baring of God – Human.

Ad 1.

An example of conventional use of the Old Testament thread is the poem “Covenants”:

*God used to fill the void tightly  
the rainbow arc festered  
now sleeping pills like white  
covenant signs  
the vacuum bends the back  
until the collapse  
until it curls up  
in the bandage strip [8, s. 279].*

It seems that the poem is based on a rather misguided concept (pills as a modern sign of the covenant), based on reduction – the traditionally recognized symbol of man’s reconciliation with God is replaced by the invention of modern

pharmacy. The word cluster “the rainbow arc festered” is not very justified, in which the striving for an effective alliteration based on the accumulation of nasal vowels probably took over. But the process of festering usually refers to badly healed wounds, which is difficult to relate to the Old Testament covenant.

In Pogonowska’s works there are many distant echoes of the Book of Genesis, for example: “Under sword vaults of darkness and rainbows” in the poem “Contemplation”, “Glow clasped the water into motionless heat” (“Passion”), where we can find distant reminiscences from the description of the creation of the world. There are also distant quotes from books less frequently explored thematologically: “The bone is struck by the wind / I abide”, which may in turn correspond to the book of Ezekiel and the description of the resurrection of dried bones in the desert: “Then He said to me, Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus saith the Lord Jehovah, Come from the four winds, thou breath, and blow upon these slain, that they may come to life. And I prophesied as I was commanded; then the breath came into them, and they came to life, and stood upon their feet, a very, very great army” (Ezekiel 37:9-10).

It seems, however, that the final “I abide”, means the subject’s identification with those waiting to be resurrected, rather than with the prophet himself. This meaning seems to be confirmed by the earlier lines: “isolated I am losing eyesight / affection of lips is drying up”.

Ad 2.

The gesture of putting universal biblical stories into recent history seems to be particularly popular immediately after World War II, when poetic imagination sought support in topos to express what was not expressed in everyday language, with the whole sense of the collapse of culture, faith in man and foundations of our civilization. Krystyna Konarska-Łosiowa wrote about the monument in the ghetto:

*It had to – out of your million hands  
ascend – the one raised up  
fighting hand [1, s. 137].*

Another, but still pre-war poem by the same poet is “Christ in the factories”, interesting enough because it is close in its meaning to “theology of liberation”: “*Before they enter the factories, to revive colossal machines with their strong hands, breathe their spirit into them, Jesus will meet them in the white of the Holy Host, so that they could listen to His voice with the hustle and bustle going around them*” [1, s. 29].

On the other hand, Aleksandra Olędzka-Frybesowa intertwines the genesis motif into the technologized landscape of modernity:

*Please, tree,  
of a big silver leaf  
metallic flickering passages  
singing with a thousand voices  
a tree of far vision  
all good and bad* [2, s. 25].

Here the poetic concept unites the biblical tree of knowledge with the transmission mast into one image. The reader is left with a sense of impoverishment, reduction of the original symbol to a mechanical object.

An interesting example of updating the biblical theme by Pogonowska is the poem from the series “Written in the hospital”, signed with the number IV, opening with “women were dying in this room”. It is a descriptive, narrative poem with a clear structure. The heroines of the poem are discreetly observed at the moment of accepting death:

*Women were dying in this room  
in a stoic in a Christian in a peasant way  
their eyes were full of light and despair  
“Lord, why have you forsaken me?” they said  
and took communion  
bowing their heads  
with tousled hair  
and from their crushed masks*

*a girlish profile leaned out*

*like a soul getting ready to fly* [3, s. 53].

The biblical quote does not raise any doubts, these are the words spoken by Jesus on the Cross at the time of his death. More precisely, these are the words recorded in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, one of the seven so-called Christ's speeches on the Cross. The same words put into women's mouths do not change their meaning; it is the context in which they are spoken that gains more meaning: a place filled with women who experience their leaving in religious terms loses its soulless, administrative character. It is not the walls that decide what takes place in the closed space of the hospital, but the eyes "full of light and despair". Perhaps surprisingly, an uncompromisingly religious attitude, with a distinctly folk tinge, is related to the transition from ugliness to beauty. "Tousled hair" says a lot about the protagonists – carelessness about their appearance indicates a very bad physical and mental condition, we can guess that they are people in the last stage of the disease. But accepting suffering, undoubtedly following the example of Christ, releases an inner beauty, "girlish profile", which is also a beauty for eternity. Somewhere here we can see a modern outline of Pogonowska's religious poetry, the poems are full of evangelical hope, leaning towards eternity, but it is the most corporeal eternity.

Ad 3.

A typical trick in Pogonowska's poetry is to put elements taken from the Bible into the contemporary landscape, or more simply, emphasize those motifs that fit into the traditional landscape, but have parallel evangelical connotations. It can be a cloud, a flame or, as in the poem "Over the ravine of the street", a sparrow:

*Over the ravine of the street*

*with a round grey sparrow*

*flying up here to the tenth floor*

*and making noise as if enjoying –*

*with the vault of the sky*

*in which planes and clouds soak*

*under the watchful eye of the TV*

*not seeing me –*

*with telephone*

*in which a few deafer and deafer phantoms* [8, s. 191].

A sparrow is the hallmark of this poetry Pogonowska often mentions other birds (which cannot be said about the rest of the fauna), but the sparrow is definitely predominant. We usually associate the biblical sparrow with the teaching of Jesus, who commands us to trust in the Lord and not to care too much about the future. It is worth noting, however, that the sparrow also appears in the Old Testament, Psalm 103.

The sparrow “flying up to the tenth floor” is an interesting procedure, because the apparent simplicity of this expression includes several elements, because we can see both upward movement (the sparrow flew up to the tenth floor) and downward movement (the bird belongs to the “vault of the sky”), expressing the essence of holiness. There are more such pseudonyms of religious elements in Pogonowska’s works, and they are in part justified by the poet’s literary statements: “I vote in favour of treating poetry in a traditional way – as an advocate of our fullest, and therefore philosophical, truth. This most important value for me must be served by the word, according to the subjective potential of poets, I do not accept other rules... And if I can agree that the imagination is the domain of the poet’s creativity, then I must stress that the imagination is understood as the foreground of consciousness, and the consciousness as the shape of feeling” [6, s. 11].

Ad 4.

It is certainly the most difficult to provide full argumentation for the last thesis, let us consider it a preliminary, shaky hypothesis, it is worth taking the first steps to somehow justify it, at least partially. On Mount Tabor, Christ reveals his divine nature, on Mount Calvary, he gives up his life as a man. Tabor is a moment of glory, Calvary is a time of humiliation. It must be clearly said: the Transfiguration as a motif does not appear directly in Pogonowska’s poetry, it is easier to point to distant echoes of Jesus’ passion (e.g. the poem “Sorrowful Mother over the corpse of the Son”). However, there are in various configurations and with varying frequency



motifs of mountain, light and cloud. The poem “I know”, for example, is such a trace, a distant echo:

*I know – the face changed – and what remains*

*When everything fell down –*

*Is it that a transparent diamond?*

*This nonentity cuts to bleed?*

*It is not enough. Only fear*

*When I bend down to my baby*

*When his breath – gives wings to my breath*

*I strike the blue gates [4, s. 43].*

Like many other poems by Pogonowska this one also leaves many question marks. We guess that the mother-child relationship is the key here, fear and blood may suggest a hospital situation. The story of Salvation seems to be included in the contour of human experience. The interpretation in these two directions is suggested by the opening line, where the “changed face” appears and supports the final line that is also a punch line: “I strike the blue gates”. The changed face is confirmed in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (the Transfiguration of the Lord is described in the three synoptic Gospels with some differences), Luke writes: “When he prayed, the appearance of his face changed, and his garment became shining white”. At this point it is worth recalling the quote from Pogonowska’s essay, quoted at the beginning; perhaps this is the clue that allows us to combine the scattered threads into a meaningful whole. The face of a child (suffering? freed from suffering?) reveals the face of God.

In doing so, one must take into account the spiritual significance of what happened during the transfiguration. We know that Christ reveals His Messianic, divine nature. This is the so-called glorious epiphany. But at the same time for us it foreshadows our glory and joy in heaven. This is what a mother experiences when she bends over her child, we can say that this moment of closeness is her epiphany, her experience of “Mount Tabor”.

Anna Pogonowska's poetry is certainly a record of a revolution in religious thinking that took place in Polish literature in the 20th century. It is a record of dramatic, personal questions for which the Bible is a common reference, but it does not provide a ready-made answer key. It is a muted search, not imposing itself on traditional biblical ornamentation.

Pogonowska's poetry is recognized by Zofia Zarębianka: "Religious poetry of the last four decades is also characterized, in nearly all authors' works, by a certain restraint of lyrical religion and lyrical emotions. Contemporary poets seem to be more aware of the inexpressibility of the Inconceivable. Certainly, a great importance for the economy of expression, manifested in the tendency to remain silent in poetry, must be attributed to assimilation of the experiences of the Cracow's Avant-garde, or perhaps more broadly, the achievements of various avant-garde trends in general. This discretion, however, probably results to a large extent from the new situation of man in the world, in which they found themselves after the hell of World War II" [9, s. 11].

This is also the poetry of the author of "Knots", immersed in tradition, rooted in historical experience.

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**Data about the author:**

Giemza Lech – Doctor of Human Sciences (Dr Hab.), Professor of Contemporary Literature Department, Faculty of Humanities, John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (Lublin, Poland).

**Сведения об авторе:**

Гемза Лех – доктор гуманитарных наук (Dr Hab.), профессор кафедры современной литературы гуманитарного факультета Люблинского католического университета им. Иоанна Павла II (Люблин, Польша).

**E-mail:** [lech.giemza@gmail.com](mailto:lech.giemza@gmail.com).