

Zdzisław J. KIJAS OFMConv

The Pontifical Academy of Theology in Cracow

THE VISION OF GOD AND MAN IN THE LITTEARY WORKS OF KAROL WOJTYŁA

So many grew around me, through me, from my self, as it were.
I became a channel, unleashing a forcecalled man
Profiles of a Cyrenean, II. 4. Actor

The title might sound too pompous and risks the reader's disappointment. Therefore, the beginning seems necessary to properly limit the dimension of these reflections. By no means are they meant to present the thorough vision of God and man that we encounter in the literary writings of Karol Wojtyła. The primary goal of these reflections is to present a short sketch of theological issues in literary works published in his *Poems and Dramas*.¹

The first assertion of this paper can become very important for further reflection: the vision of God and man and the literary writings of Karol Wojtyła is an integral "reality," merged by interdependent references and interrelated themes, that are so plentiful and diverse that full analysis is impossible in this short paper. This doesn't mean that one should resign from attempting such effort. It is rather an enticement to follow a suggestion of the leader-Karol who in the poem entitled *Profiles of the Cyrenean* directs these words to the reader:

Unable to grow up
to men, different men – their truth hangs over me
a limb of a sad tree. And I try,
try hard sometime.²

Truly, the human thought does not "reach a level" of the truth about people, which like the sky above, although beautiful is hard to reach, al

¹ Karol Wojtyła, *Poezje. Poems*, Trans. Jerzy Peterkiewicz, Afterword by Krzysztof Dybciak, Kraków 1995.

² *Profiles of a Cyrenean*, II.7. *Man's Thoughts*, [in:] K. Wojtyła, *Poezje. Poems...*, p. 122.

though charming cannot be embraced. Even more so the human thought cannot reach the understanding of the full vision of God. “The wefts are deeply entangled. Try to untwist them, and you will unravel yourself.”³ Similar thoughts about God and man in his poetry are so tightly entangled that clearing them up, presenting them next to or across each other for the sake of detailed analysis is rather impossible, or very difficult to say the least. The full explanation would border with rooting up yourself with them which would mean putting your own self outside of the circle of authentic life pulsating with the presence of God.

The Paradox of Truth

Lack of seeing the details, the impossibility of tracing out all bordering lines, crossing ways between man and God creates intense suffering because it creates a state of mind in which “he must tear through the thicket of signs to the word’s very center, its weight the ripeness of fruit.”⁴ What should be done then? What should one do for the mind to dress itself in the understanding of the word? Give oneself up to contemplation – suggests Wojtyła. One has to accept the stature of biblical Jacob in who “the silent tower of knowledge needed no inspiration to grow. Aware of thought, he lacked the words.”⁵

Suddenly the full night extinguished eye after eye
of sheep and camels, of children and wives.
With his tower of knowledge Jacob remained alone
but sensed that someone was enclosing him and would not leave.

That someone – the same one – broke open his awareness,
in the same way, yet different from the way of children, sheep and chattels..
And He did not crush or push them down. In one whirl
of embrace they were all in Him, trembling like petals stirred by anxiety within.

And Jacob, too, trembled in Him. Never did reality split
so suddenly. Jacob bent under
its weight, and thus helped thought to grasp
the simplest balance in the whirl of wonder.⁶

The truth can be learned, can be touched, creates the possibility of man grasping its greatness, however it does not crush the created mind,

³ *Profiles of a Cyrenean*, II. 8. *Description of Man*, [in:] K. Wojtyła, *Poezje. Poems...*, p. 124.

⁴ *Thought – Strange Space*, 3, [in:] K. Wojtyła, *Poezje. Poems...*, p. 80.

⁵ *Ibid*, II. *Jacob*, [in:] K. Wojtyła, *Poezje. Poems...*, p. 82.

⁶ *Ibid*, II. *Jacob*, [in:] K. Wojtyła, *Poezje. Poems...*, p. 82.

does not despise him, but on the contrary, embraces him gently and leads him to their heavenly rooms. Karol Wojtyła thinks that this is an important indication of truth for everyone who authentically desires to recognize it and live it. It is even more important for one who lives with the great longing of learning and deepening the truth about God and man. The position of shepherd Jacob becomes then something of a necessity and indispensability. It is characterized with humility, openness and readiness of accepting in its fullness revealed power. Jacob therefore who “amidst the powers of the earth he had never felt strange,” trembled when encountering truth.

The theme of connection between God and the human being in the literary works of Wojtyła is extremely rich. At this point the presence of some more important threads will be presented. At the same time they will show the personal journey and intellectual pilgrimage of every reader.

The Closeness of God

The reader of literary works of Karol Wojtyła written in the 1950's and later years is struck by a powerful feeling of the closeness of God, who is not revealed as a distant and sketchy Being, but rather as God who reveals Himself as exceptionally close, deeply united with the human being and very concerned about his true happiness. In his *Later Recollection of the Meeting* one can find vast fragments of poetical expressions that tend to confirm this intuition although they point not only to the closeness of God, but also to His love of the human being and suffering connected with it. The young poet addresses God in the following words:

You keep silent, but today I know – open for ever
by your word – that I did not suffer in You
to my full measure.

Tell me – my love today
wants to bring back that pain,
take it from You and wind it around again
like a sharp band.

Too late. Every pain today
Returning from You,
changes to love on its way.

Such a shortcut, such goodness of perception!
And You did not even raise your eyes.
You talked to me only with those eyes
which the well recreated
in its deep brightness.⁷

⁷ *Song of the Brightness of Water*, 4. *Later Recollection of the Meeting*, [in:] K. Wojtyła, *Poezje. Poems...*, p. 52.

The subject of learning and experiencing God dominates also in Wojtyła's poem entitled *The Samaritan Woman*. Although it is a short poem, it allows the reader to penetrate deeply into the life of the Supreme Being revealing, at the same time, the character of His ties with the human being:

It joined us together, the well;
the well led me into you.
No one between us but light
deep in the well, the pupil of the eye
set in an orbit of stones.

Within your eyes, I,
drawn by the well,
and enclosed.⁸

In the poet's words God reveals himself as a Well in whose depths everyone can see oneself. At the same time, He's a *well*, from which the human soul can draw the vast depth of intimate friendship, experienced only by the people who are closest and enamored. This is a strong friend and always-fresh friendship that offers the only way to satisfy the human heart. From that point the encounter of the closeness of God becomes so intense and strong that the lover can call out from the depths of his heart:

Yet it is good. I can never take all of you
into me. Stay then as a mirror in the well.
Leaves and flowers remain, and each astonished gaze
brings them down
to my eyes transfixed more by light
than by sorrow.⁹

The thoughts written in 1950 take on additional meaning in later works. The reality of the mystery of God grows in Wojtyła's poems from the later period. In these works God cannot be fully understood by the human mind despite his strong desire and longing. It is because God is reflected in the human soul as in a mirror.

The human being struggles with God and God struggles with the human being. The person seeks a deeper knowledge of God, however, even more so he desires to understand himself and because of this he struggles with a constant internal stress. This tension creates an unceasing desire to get closer to God and to learn His mysteries. From that point on creation overflows God with questions hoping for a full and exhaustive answer, expecting instant understanding of all mysteries. The human being is

⁸ Ibid, 6. *The Samaritan Woman*, [in:] K. Wojtyła, *Poezje. Poems...*, p. 54.

⁹ Ibid, 8. *Song of the Brightness of Water*, [in:] K. Wojtyła, *Poezje. Poems...*, p. 58.

ready to do a lot. He is capable of sacrificing everything to get the desired answers. Where can this happen? The answer seems to be presented in Karol Wojtyła's poem *For the Companions of the Road*:

If you are looking for that place
 where Jacob wrestled,
 do not wander to the lands of Arabia,
 nor look for the brook
 on maps – you'll find the tracks much nearer.
 In thought's perspective let the light of things appear
 more closely bound by thought and ever more simply shaped;
 then the image will not scatter but have weight.

Prepare to lift it within yourself
 and be wholly transformed to the substance
 where silence and solitude are good.
 Being alone is possible for man
 Since death can tear no one away
 From the solitude within.¹⁰

Getting to know God is not the action of the moment, it cannot have an occasional, casual or incidental character. In contrast, it should be to some extent a continual way of life, as an important element or the most important recipe for happiness in life. This is Wojtyła's thought that he maintains faithfully to the present day. This is also the vocation of the theologian, to reveal the light of God's truth. This doesn't mean to look for God outside of us but to discover His loving presence in our own hearts, giving Him full reign. The poet says clearly "prepare to lift it within yourself and be wholly transformed to the substance where silence and solitude are good. Being alone is possible for man since death can tear no one away from the solitude within". Discovering God, or even struggling with our inability to perceive Him, at the same time, the human being allows God to know oneself and enters into intimate communion of love with Him. The life starts to take on new colors unknown up to that point because they come from God.

Striving or not striving to know oneself, or therefore, living in the mystery

The human being is mystery. Every one of us, writes Wojtyła, has two sides. "In every one of us there resides both a man exchangeable like

¹⁰ *Thought – Strange Space*, IV. *For the Companions of the Road*, [in:] K. Wojtyła, *Poezje. Poems...*, p. 88.

money and, in his innermost depths, a non-exchangeable man known only to himself.”¹¹ One cannot run away from one or the other character of the human person. One cannot fight with those that create a dual image of a person. Does it mean therefore, that all that is left is resignation and helplessness? Not in the least! “It’s enough for me simply to be aware of the other, says Max in the drama entitled *Our God’s Brother*, the non-exchangeable one, and to know that within me there is a dividing line between the two. Otherwise life would become commonplace and stupid.”¹²

The human being cannot run away from the mystery he carries in himself but on the other side, this mystery is not overwhelming him, quite the opposite, it invites one to crossing it over bravely and solve it. In this way, the mystery is not an obstacle but rather a strong invitation enters into other, higher realms of understanding achievable by people with a spiritual sensitivity open to God’s presence.

In the poem *Thought’s Resistance to Words* located in the volume “Thought – Strange Space”, Karol Wojtyła writes:

Sometimes it happens in conversation: we stand
facing truth and lack the words,
have no gesture, no sign;
and yet – we feel – no word, no gesture
or sign would convey the whole image
that we must enter alone and face, like Jacob.

This isn’t mere wrestling with images
carried in our thoughts;
we fight with the likeness of all things
that inwardly constitute man.
But when we act can our deeds surrender
the ultimate truths we presume to ponder?¹³

The human person is never able to “encompass” in its fullness the treasure he carries in himself. He is also helpless when it comes to presenting, in human terms, the richness of God’s life. He has to therefore, humbly bow before the mystery of His life and the mystery of his existence.

¹¹ *Our God’s Brother*, [in:] K. Wojtyła, *The Collected Plays and Writings on Theater*, Translated with Introductions by B. Taborski, University of California Press, Berkeley–Los Angeles–London 1987, s. 164.

¹² *Ibid*, s. 164.

¹³ *Thought – Strange Space*, 1. *Thought’s Resistance to Words*, [in:] K. Wojtyła, *Po ezje. Poems...*, p. 78.

“The love that still overflows”, or the desire of love

Karol Wojtyła wrote:

You don't really suffer when love is flooding you:
it's a patch of enthusiasm, pleasant and shallow;
if it dries up – do you think of the void?
Between heart and heart there is always a gap.
You must enter it slowly –
till the eye absorbs color,
the ear tunes to rhythm.

Love and move inward, discover your will,
Shed heart's evasions and the mind's harsh control.¹⁴

Love is the sense of human life. Not only love given as a gift by God but also love offered from one human being to another. Without it he suffers, but he suffers also with it. He suffers loving, but he suffers also without love. He suffers deeply when he longs for the love of another person, but he won't be able to avoid his suffering rejecting someone's love. Which one is more painful? There is no way to answer, because these are two different kinds of sufferings, although the source is the same – the Spring of God's love. The human suffers, when the “body” symbolizing the whole position in life, its daily choices and practices of life, are not keeping pace with the call to love, when they do not respond to their desires and challenges. He suffers greatly because he knows that to some degree he responds to the sacrifice of God's and human love. It reminds then the position of Mary Magdalene who loved, but daily routine departed clearly the deepest meaning of desires. Wojtyła wrote about it in the poem *Magdalene*:

The spirit has shifted, my body remains
in its old place. Pain overtakes me
to last as long as my body is growing.
Now I can give it food from the spirit
where before there was only hunger.

At times love aches: there are weeks, months, years.
Like the roots of a dry tree my tongue is dry
and the roof of my mouth. My lips are unpainted.
It takes long: Truth sounding out error.
But it is He who feels
the drought of the whole world, not I.¹⁵

¹⁴ *Profiles of a Cyrenean*, 12. *Man of Emotion*, [in:] K. Wojtyła, *Poezje. Poems...*, p. 128.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 11. *Magdalene*, [in:] K. Wojtyła, *Poezje. Poems...*, p. 126–128.

Adam experienced this state in the drama “Brother of our God.” His “spirit shifted suddenly” towards the poor, neglected, homeless people, but “body still stayed.” Hence the fight between mind and body, internal struggle between “enough” and “still not enough” of gestures of goodness, brought clothing, beggar’s bread for the inhabitants of city missions. Many of the residents rushed on him, grabbing food and clothing, whereas someone screamed from the corner:

I’m telling you for the last time. All of you are scum! If someone spits in your face, you’ll take it. Those scoundrels in their warm, comfy palaces wear fancy clothes, drink liqueurs; and sometimes, if they feel like it, they throw you a scrap: an old rag or moldy bread. And you bow to them, call them benefactors, and kiss their hands.

It’s all unjust. It’s wrong. Don’t you get it?

Why is he wearing a suit and tie while I have nothing to put on my back? Enough, enough. He should make himself scarce.

*(Murmuring in the corner. Adam lowers his eyes, keeps silent like a man who has been whipped. He takes everything they say personally.)*¹⁶

His body “still stayed in the old place” and he was overtaken with pain. With following visits his interior started undergoing changes because the call to love was overwhelming and was not allowed to become quieted by some small offering, an insignificant alms. On the contrary, he desired to give himself fully and unconditionally.

In other circumstances, although equally intense as well, the need of fulfillment in love appears in the theoretical play *The Jeweler’s Shop*. After long meditations, Andrew, one of the main heroes of the drama, notices that the absence of Theresa means the lose of the sense of life, its full charm and desired beauty. He expresses this truth in the following words:

Teresa, Teresa, Teresa –
like a strange focus of my way to maturity –
no longer a prism of superficial rays,
but a being of true light.
And I know I cannot go further.
I know I shall not seek anymore.
I only tremble at the thought that
I could so easily have lost her.

For several years she had been walking by me, and I did not know that it was she who was walking and maturing.¹⁷

Love, although directly not referred to in the cited fragment, can be strongly felt. In love, Karol Wojtyła saw particular type of strength. It

¹⁶ *Our God’s Brother*, [in:] K. Wojtyła, *The Collected Plays...*, p. 200.

¹⁷ *The Jeweler’s Shop*, [in:] K. Wojtyła, *The Collected Plays...*, p. 284.

possessed the possibility of freeing something unknown up to that point, setting a proper direction in the development of the person. The Biblical motif of “image and likeness” is very important to the event of love between two people. Wojtyła returns to this biblical truth many times, suggesting clearly that to him it is the truth that is very precious and very realistic. Especially frequently, Adam will be referring to it in the drama *Our God's Brother*. This motive is the guaranty of dignity of the human person and at the same time the goal of pilgrimage.

Love bears the feeling of responsibility for the other. Firstly, it is the responsibility for the one which you love and desire everything good. However, foregoing responsibility at this point would be false because it demands a much more generous and more perfect gesture, it calls to care for many others. This is next thought that appears in the mentioned drama about St. Brother Albert. In the conversation with Max who says, “He cannot create life and the destiny of another person,” Adam asks surprised:

You mean you will go your own way, build your little nest, taking advantage of the seemingly secure social system. But if that system fails, if you chance to find yourself at the bottom – why then?¹⁸

The human being cannot close within himself, as Max suggests in further conversation. He cannot create permanent values relying only on his own strengths. Contrary, he has to “disperse what he has” to gain even more as much as possible. Adam states it very well:

I thought like that for a long time. I thought so even two months ago. But since then I have seen that is not enough. We cannot permit a whole mass of people to swarm through the poorhouses, leading almost animal lives, gradually deprived of all awareness except of hunger and fear. No, no!¹⁹

The theme of responsibility for the other person, which flows from true love of neighbor, will show in many different ways in later works and the life of Wojtyła. As a refrain of a beautiful musical piece, he will be returning to the motive of responsible love, ready for great sacrifices. On the other hand, one can see continuous disproportion “between the wish for happiness and a man's potential.”²⁰ The strength and the greatness of desires exceed natural capabilities and therefore suffering becomes an unavoidable phenomenon, as helplessness and impossibility of full realization of his desires.

¹⁸ *Our God's Brother*, [in:] K. Wojtyła, *The Collected Plays...*, p. 180.

¹⁹ *Our God's Brother*, [in:] K. Wojtyła, *The Collected Plays...*, p. 180.

²⁰ *The Jeweler's Shop*, [in:] K. Wojtyła, *The Collected Plays...*, p. 288.

* * *

In the poem *Error* dated 1952, which can be found in the volume of poetry of Karol Wojtyła entitled “Thought – Strange Space,” we find very interesting words that, to some degree, can become a summary of these reflections. Wojtyła wrote:

How to extract the still center of thought?
I can bend the street to one side,
find fault in the eyes of girls, of boys
walking by;
and when the lines of cars converge
only their windscreens perhaps
capture infinity.

And people say:
our thought is bound up with the clarity of things,
our thought remains true to the power
of ordinary things.
But if still so few of them are open to us
Surely our thought is not complete.²¹

The most important seems to be the interesting fragment: “But if still so few of them (thoughts) are open to us Surely our thought is not complete.” Truly, the reflection of all the works by Karol Wojtyła is not finished yet. These few commentaries have character of general suggestions or directions for those who would like, by way of his political writings, continue independently. They are a kind of road sign, direction of search, and by no means pretend to show the complete vision of God and human being and his literary works.

WIZJA BOGA I CZŁOWIEKA W LITERACKICH UTWORACH KAROLA WOJTYŁY

Streszczenie

Przedmiotem analizy są tu wybrane utwory Karola Wojtyły, w polskim oryginale wydane w tomie: *Poezje i dramaty* (Kraków 1969). Jest to skrótowy zarys problematyki teologicznej w tego rodzaju pismach przyszłego papieża. Refleksja autora skupiła się na kilku zagadnieniach wydobytych z omawianej spuścizny literackiej Karola Wojtyły. Odnoszą się one do paradoksu prawdy, bliskości Boga, tajemnicy życia człowieka, do tajemnicy miłości i odpowiedzialności człowieka. Wywody autora wytyczają pewien kierunek dalszych badań literackich i teologicznych poezji Karola Wojtyły.

²¹ *Thought – Strange Space*, 2. *Error*, [in:] K. W o j t y ł a, *Poezje. Poems...*, p. 84–86.