
RELIGION AND LITERATURE

CASE STUDY - MYTHANALYSIS

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Abstract

Starting from the famous essay by T.S. Eliot, this study exposes the relationship between literature and religion. The basic idea is that the literary work is not just a creation of the imagination but it possesses certain values, which is why literary criticism should be doubled by an ethical and religious analysis. The second part expounds the case study of the method promoted by the historian of religion Ioan Petru Culianu: mythanalysis. With reference to several works of Romanian literature, he has shown that there are certain meanings of some literary creations which can come out only by making reference to the religious meanings that the (post) modern man is no longer conscious of. The analysis of literary texts from a religious perspective can thus be a serious bridge of dialogue between Theology and the modern world.

Keywords: religion, literature, myth, mythanalysis, T.S. Eliot

1. Introduction

In this paper we will refer to a special case of literary criticism from the religious perspective. The basic idea is that the literary work is not just a creation of the imagination, but it possesses certain values, which is why literary criticism should be doubled by an ethical and religious analysis. The second part expounds the case study of the method promoted by the historian of religion Ioan Petru Culianu: myth analysis. Even if this is not an exclusively Christian perspective, it may be a possible model for theologians in order to identify and appreciate the theological-ethical motifs and implications of modern literature. Only this way can a dialogue between Theology and the (post) modern world take place, showing that there is complementary and not antagonism between culture and faith [1].

2. T.S. Elliot about the relationship between religion and literature

The title of our study takes the title of a famous essay belonging to T.S. Eliot [2], an essay which can be seen as his reaction against the tradition which

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was analyzing the literary works from a purely aesthetic point of view (remember Oscar Wilde's saying 'art for art's sake').

Thus, the 'New Critics' in particular believed that literature should not be evaluated for its ethical and theological significance. On the contrary, T.S. Eliot was of the opinion that literary criticism was not enough: a literary work had to be regarded as a work of imagination but it also had to be considered from an ethical and a theological point of view. This is especially important in our times, when there is no agreement on ethical and theological values.

Although literature had previously been judged according to the moral standards, one came to the conclusion that there was no relationship between religion and literature. T.S. Eliot thinks that there is and there should be a relationship between the two and, in the above-mentioned essay, he discusses the application of the religious factor in the literary criticism. Doing a review of the universal literature - especially the English literature - Eliot concludes that there are three types of religious literature. Firstly, there is the religious literature which has literary qualities: for example, the authorized version of the Bible or the works of Jeremy Taylor. Those who describe the Bible only as a literary work were called 'parasites' since - according to Eliot- the Bible must be considered as the 'word of God'. Secondly, he mentions the devotional poetry. A devotional poet - he says - is not the one who is dealing with the subject in the religious spirit, but the one who is dealing with a part of the subject. (Eliot considers that poets such as Spencer, Hopkins, Vaughan and Southwell are minor poets while Dante, Corneille and Racine are major poets.) Thirdly, there are the works of authors who want to convey the cause of religion; this type of works forms the propaganda literature, such as works of Chesterton, 'The Man who Was Thursday' and 'Father Brown'.

Eliot deplors the irrationality that lies behind the separation of literature from its religious analysis. Exemplifying literature through the novel (which has the greatest effect) he says that this secularization was a gradual process over the last three hundred years. This process was a continuous one starting with Defoe and it can be divided into three stages. The first stage is that of the novels where faith is put aside and forgotten in man's lifestyle (authors belonging to this phase are Fielding and Thackeray). In the second stage, faith is questioned and challenged (this stage includes authors like George Eliot, George Meredith and Thomas Hardy). The third stage is the era in which we live and Eliot includes here all the contemporary novelists, with the exception of James Joyce.

This secularization is obvious in the way a reader reads a novel - without worrying about the effect it has on one's behaviour. The common factor between religion and literature is behaviour. Our religion requires ethics, judgment and our own criticism - both ours and our fellows'.

In its turn, literature has an effect on our behaviour. Whatever the intentions of the author, his work affects us all as human beings. Even if we read a literary work only with an aesthetic purpose (keeping our moral judgment in another register), it affects us as human beings, whether we intend it or not.

Modern readers have lost their religious values. They no longer have the wisdom to be able to obtain knowledge of life by comparing a point of view with another one. Besides, the knowledge of life that we get from a work of fiction is not life itself, but is the knowledge of the way of life of other people. What increases the difficulty is the fact that there are too many books and the reader is confused. Only the most important modern writers have a positive effect, while the contemporary writers produce an effect that is degrading. The reader should thus keep in mind two things – ‘what we like’ i.e. what we feel and ‘what we should like’ which is our deficient understanding. As honest people, we should not assume that what we like is what we should like and as true Christians we should assume that we like what we should like.

Eliot is mainly concerned with the secularization of literature. He is not concerned with the spiritual matters: he simply forgets or ignores the primacy of the transcendent over the natural world. Most of the books are written by people who have no real faith in a transcendent reality. Moreover, they also ignore the fact that there are still many believers in the world. It is the duty of Christians to use certain standards in addition to those used by the rest of the world. If a Christian is aware of the gap between him and contemporary literature, he will not be affected by it.

Most people consider the economic shortcomings as the cause of all problems and require drastic economic changes, while others want more or less drastic social changes. Both types of changes are opposite to each other, but their common point is that they assume the secularization hypothesis. Some want the subordination of the individual interests to those of the state. But Eliot does not agree with these people. He does not complain about modern literature because of the fact that it is immoral or amoral, but because it instigates people to try any kind of experience and not to neglect or miss any. A Christian reader should conduct a literary criticism in accordance with the world. But he should, moreover, apply the ethical and theological standards to it [<http://www.literaryjewels.com/search?q=eliot+religion>, accessed on 06.06.2013].

3. The relationship between Theology and literature: some recent views

In the introduction to one of his books, Elmar Salmann presents the novel as “the mirror and maybe the most accurate reflection of the birth and decay of the modern subject”. It is thus “the small sacrament of modernity in which we reflect, we understand, we alienate and find ourselves” [3]. The novel involves a whole Universe, a world in itself whose being seems to exceed even the author's intentions. “The world of the novel is a democratic world, as each character is right and has the same rights ... In the great works, the character is greater than the author.” [3, p. 16] The beginning of the modern novel - the author believes - is linked with Boccaccio's ‘Decameron’. One by one, there are mentioned other names of writers and novels. Of the great authors of humanity are evoked: Italo

Calvino, Tolstoy, Balzac, Milan Kundera, Thomas Mann, Robert Musil, Franz Kafka, Hermann Hesse, Marcel Proust, etc.

Interestingly, not only the Christian novel like that written by Bernanos is addressed. In agreement with T.S. Eliot, Salmann's thesis is that even the novel which does not directly approach religious matters "involves relevant theological reasons" [3, p. 27]. Therefore, the analysis of novels has to become part of today's Theology. Here is the author's thesis: "If we discover so many theological reasons present in the huge universe of the modern novels, Christianity would reveal refreshed, rejuvenated, not reduced to dogma or morals, but would turn into an almost musical motif, into a possibility or a fertile impossibility. All the motifs of theology would come to meet us in a new light. And it might again wake up in us a profound happiness for the huge background that modern culture owes to Christian motifs." [3, p. 31]

The need for dialogue between Theology and modern literature is also affirmed by Pantelis Kalaitzidis [4], the dean of the Volos Academy for Theological Studies (Greece). In fact, this dialogue falls into a broader one, that between Church and the contemporary world. A decisive step towards going beyond isolationism into a traditionalist or ethnic self-sufficiency is to pay attention to the cultural creations of today's man. "The Orthodox Church and theology are asked to accept the acquisitions of modernity and to reflect upon postmodernity and the reality of the multicultural societies." [4, p. 61-62]

The dialogue between Theology and literature is facilitated by the analogy of the symbolic language of the scriptural and patristic texts with that of literature. Even though the two have different functions, they can be found in the approach to express a reality that goes beyond the immediate. As a consequence, the true theology is fundamentally unrelated to any censorship. We must admit without fear that "the positive or exact sciences, philosophy, literature and other subjects, are not required to use the principles of theology, to speak from a theological perspective or verify the Orthodox teaching... The problem of numerous theologians in their reporting to literature lies precisely in their inability to understand the function and the content of the literary myth as well as in their requirement to literature – and also to philosophy, biology and other disciplines - not only to speak the language of theology, but also to confirm the theological truths." [4, p. 64] This attitude, however, expresses an exaggerated 'theological imperialism', which can be placed in parallel with the other extreme attitude: to expulse Theology in the field of knowledge and consider it as backward in relation to modern sciences. The authentic relationship is the balanced one, where Theology and modern culture mutually admit their sphere of action and their own means of expression. Therefore, the time when "the dialogue between theology and literature must begin" has come [4, p. 66].

4. Case study: mythanalysis

Further on, we will refer to an example of literary analysis made from a religious perspective. The author is Ioan Petru Culianu [5, 6] and the method

used for this is called mythanalysis. In terms of terminology, the term first appears in Gilbert Durand who admits having created it with direct reference to the name of psychoanalysis [7, 8]. Whatever the source of inspiration for Culianu – Ileana Mihăilă is of the opinion that both Durand and Culianu were immensely influenced by Mircea Eliade (in his turn, Adrian Marino had talked about mythcriticism), on the other hand it is considered that there is a discontinuation between the myth analysis applied by Culianu and Carl Gustav Jung's interpretation of archetypes [7] – we note that he has carried out several exercises of myth criticism upon the thinking of Romanian writers Vasile Voiculescu, Mihai Eminescu and Ioan Slavici. These studies and articles are: 'Vasile Voiculescu, romancier al iluziei si al sperantei (*Vasile Voiculescu, Novelist of Illusion and Hope*)', 'Mit si simbol în proza lui V. Voiculescu (*Myth and Symbol in the Prose of V. Voiculescu*)', 'Notă despre *opsis* si *theoria* în poezia lui Eminescu (*Note on Opsis and Theoria in Eminescu's poetry*)', 'Romantism acosmic la Mihai Eminescu (*Acosmic Romanticism in Mihai Eminescu*)', 'Fantasmele nihilismului la Eminescu (*The Phantasms of Nihilism in Eminescu*)', 'Fantasmele erosului la Eminescu (*The Phantasms of Eros in Eminescu*)', 'Fantasmele libertății la Mihai Eminescu (*The Phantasms of Freedom in Mihai Eminescu*)', 'Fantasmele fricii sau cum ajungi revolutionar de profesie (*The Illusions of Fear or How to Become a Professional Revolutionary*)', 'Nimicirea fără milă' în nuvela *Moara cu noroc* de Ioan Slavici (1881) (*The Merciless Destruction' in the short-story The Lucky Mill (1881) by Ioan Slavici*). They were later collected and published in a single volume [9].

In one of these studies, based on the assumption that literature contains a "certain mythical material that the researcher has the duty to bring to light" Culianu defines mythanalysis as "a practical approach consisting in discovering the latent myths inside the literary text and interrogating them in order to determine some possibilities (of interpretation) from those included in their semantic sphere" [9, p. 82-83]. Another study summarizes the three stages to be involved in the myth analysis research: 1) establishing the importance of the myth for the author in question, in order to decide if one can draw semiological and psychological consequences 2) determining the type of myth, the context or the profound situation to which it is applied 3) attempting to delineate the unconscious area that the myth activates both in the author and in the reader [9, p. 67].

In illustration, we will only analyze Culianu's mythological analysis of an aspect of Eminescu's work – the acosmic romanticism – and Ioan Slavici's novel 'The Lucky Mill'.

The acosmic romanticism is a common theme in the three versions of the poem 'Muresan' or 'Mureșanu' written by Mihai Eminescu in the years 1869, 1872 and 1876. Other critics have also determined that there were some dualistic motifs clearly stated here, reflecting the influence of A. Schopenhauer's philosophy and also Gnostic themes (for example N. Balotă). The word *charm* (rom. *mrajiă*) in Eminescu has a function which is analogous to the term *goeteia*, designating the negative attraction exerted by the earthly body on the celestial

soul. The above-mentioned poem also includes several motifs that define the acosmic dualism specific to the Gnostic anthropology: 1) the anthropological acosmism: man stands outside the world he has been thrown into, 2) the evil demiurge of this world: unlike the 'true' divinity, absolutely transcendent, although he believes that he is unique and powerful, this demiurge has demonstrations of force that are ultimately ridiculous, 3) the transcendent consubstantiality of the human being with the divine makes him superior to the demiurge, from which he can liberate by gnosis, 4) the rejection of the Old Testament God as the hypostasis of the bad demiurge and concomitantly the positive valuing of his opponents who belong to the 'true' divinity, 5) the elitism of the Gnostic systems, 6) metempsychosis (reincarnation of the soul in bodies) [9, p. 39-40]. The careful analysis of Eminescu's verses confirms the presence of these topics: 'evil' and 'hate' appear as two creative entities and their product is the world history; the human history is the history of a 'cursed race' and therefore evil 'is the mystery in the soul of the creature'. If 'the core of the world is eternal wickedness', then Satan's role is positive: it reveals the truth of the world (see the role of gnosis), saying that 'everything in the world is worthy to perish...'. Satan's action is summarized by Eminescu in one verse: "You pulled hell to throw it to the stars". It is a paradoxical image designating the 'demonization' of the entire Universe - broadening the category of hell to the whole visible universe. Finally, there are presented some other Gnostic themes - which we do not mention here - determining I.P. Culianu to categorize the poem 'Mureşanu' as "a romantic variation on a Gnostic motif" [9, p. 44].

Dedicated to the memory of his former teacher Cicerone Poghiric, 'the exercise of mythanalysis' made by Culianu to the novel 'The Lucky Mill' aims at demonstrating that his hermeneutical method should not be reserved exclusively to a type of literature, especially the romantic one. On the contrary, the analysis of a 'realistic' novel - the 'first' and "the best detective story ever written in the Romanian literature" [9, p. 143] - gives Ioan Petru Culianu the opportunity to demonstrate the following paradox: not only that the effectiveness of the mythanalysis method is not limited to the symbolic or fantastic texts but the more is the text produced by a more 'positive' spirit, the more 'realistic' it is, the more spectacular will the results of the myth analysis be. Indeed, in Slavici's short-story one can find the surprising ideational parallels with the great myth of Mani [9, p. 147-149]: for the author, the city means civilization whose influence extends to a point beyond which it is dangerous to venture [9, p. 147]. This point is marked precisely by the 'lucky mill', the inn run by Ghiţă. Beyond the 'five crosses' which are marking the limits of the order, lays the territory of violence and death - the world ruled by Lică 'the accountant', the leader of the swineherds. It is no coincidence that five characters descend from the world of order to meet the disorder: their leader, *pater familias*, will be compelled to enter into a pact with the great representative of death, the head swineherd and therefore he will be sacrificed. But this sacrifice precisely will allow the forces of order to destroy the harmful factor-disorder. "The innkeeper's staying at 'The Lucky Mill' has the character of a mission in which he is destined, without

knowing it, to be sacrificed so as to allow the capture of the powers of evil.” [9, p. 147] The presence of other symbolic elements justifies the analysis of the short-story based on the mythological elements: the belief that the pig is an animal out of the inferno is widespread and the analogy between the crosses and the number of Ghiță’s family members is sustained when the author says that two crosses were of stone (those who will die), while the remaining three were of wood (those who will get out alive) [9, p. 150].

5. Conclusions

T.S. Eliot has emphasized the need to analyze a work of fiction not only linguistically but also ethically and religiously. He has also identified several types of religious literature. Even the novel that does not directly concern religious themes concerns relevant theological motifs and, therefore, the analysis of the great works of the world literature must become a part of the theology today.

For the historian of religion and former professor at the University of Chicago, Ioan Petru Culianu, ‘literature is a myth’. “Any story in which fantasy expresses a situation that tends to become paradigmatic – and there is no literary product, however small, where life was not immobilized in a pattern – is a *myth*. The only difference between the literary myth and the religious myth is the fact that one cannot establish any connection with the ritual life of a community.” [9, p. 175] Taking this belief, we subscribe to the idea that the analysis of literary texts from the religious point of view can be a serious bridge of dialogue between Theology and the modern world. It is what we have mentioned in the first part of the study and the spectacular results of the myth analysis used by Culianu can set an example and a stimulus for theologians to evaluate the cultural products of humanity since the beginning of the 20th century not in contempt but with great care – judging them through the set of Christian values.

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