

For many years now we have witnessed a growing world-wide interest in the sacred element of culture. Also literary criticism and scholarship have approached that sphere of problems. Polish literature, with its close and manifold historical links with religion, is in this respect a particularly gratifying object of study.

It seemed desirable to focus even more attention on the problems of the sacred in literature by organizing a special conference. The choice of its location was quite natural: it was the Catholic University of Lublin. The Lublin university community had for many years shown an interest in the relations between religion and literature; for many years the University had a Department of Research on Religious Literature, with a number of publications to its credit.

The conference on *The Sacred in Literature* organised by that Department jointly with the University's Chair of Theory of Literature was held at the Catholic University of Lublin from May 16 to May 18, 1979. It seems to have been the first purely scholarly conference of this sort. It was attended by representatives of nearly all the centres of Polish studies in Poland and by some foreign guests.

The papers read at the conference constitute almost the entire contents of *Roczniki Humanistyczne*, vol. 28, No.1. Only two of the speakers have not submitted their texts for publication: Docent Jerzy Woronczak (*External Manifestations of the Sacredness of Persons and Things in the Writings of Pope Gregory the Great and St. Gregory of Tours*) and Docent Władysław Stróżewski (*Perfect Fulfilment. The Sacred in Norwid's Fortepian Szopena*). On the other hand, the volume includes one text not presented at the conference though listed in its programme, Professor I. Sławińska's *Contemporary Liturgical Theatre*.

The plan of the volume clearly shows a strong representation of theoretical and methodological papers. An equally numerous group of texts deals with modern literature, thus testifying to the relevance of the question of the sacred to contemporary culture. Also these latter articles reveal a distinct tendency to methodological and theoretical or historical generalization. The tendency can also be seen in some other papers that are concerned with the literary past or with folklore. This theoretical bias corresponded to the organizers' original intentions, for it had seemed that the first conference on the sacred in literature should be particularly responsive to problems of a general nature.

One of these problems, recurring in a number of papers and often resumed in the discussions, concerned the very notion of "the sacred". The conference was guided by a very broad interpretation of the word, which was used as a cover term for anything in literature that is supernatural or connected with a religious attitude or that goes beyond the horizon of our immediate experience. The term thus delimited the area of observation rather than any concrete and methodologically well-defined set of research problems. But there was another sense of "the sacred" also occurring at the conference, one related to certain proposals of the contemporary study of religion, mainly those put forward by Rudolph Otto and Mircea Eliade. "The sacred" is here to be understood as that which we worship, which we fear, which is "above" us, which is mysterious. It would seem that some literary phenomena, particularly in modern literature, are amenable to an interpretation employing this "primitive" category. The question of the essence of the Christian sacrum was often raised at the conference. Some participants regarded it as a synonym of "holiness", while others identified it with the holy person, that is, with God. There also was a suggestion to understand the sacred in a very broad sense, as a special kind of value, which arises in relation to a person, to the other, the "thou" to which everything relates; the great "Thou" of Christianity is God Himself. There was a growing awareness at the conference that the term which formed its topic must always be adapted to the reality which it is meant to describe; it must be understood within a particular context and function. In brief, one realized the existence of a "shifting area" of the sacred and also the possibility of employing other, more adequate terms in the study of this aspect of literature.

Several approaches to the interpretation of literature in its sacral aspect could be seen at the conference. One of them was to show the sacred element in its function as co-creator of poetry, of its distinctive traits, its problems and genres, and as a participator in the poetic. Another approach was to seek in literature theology in the broad sense, or even something broader than that, i.e. religious attitudes, but with an effort to respect the autonomy of the literary work, its inner world constructed according to the „author's" rules and directions. Opposed to this search for religion and theology in literature was what might be called a theology of literature, which aimed at determining and evaluating the religious attitudes of a literary work in terms of the theological assumptions of the interpreter. It examined the religious consciousness of literature against an assumed model of religious consciousness. Yet another type of interpretation consisted in trying to understand the sacred through the medium of culture or folklore, even pagan folklore. Finally, let us note some interesting attempts to probe for the sacred in the broadest sense, often in texts seemingly devoid of all religion.

In fact, effort was made not only to reach deep into literature in search of the sacred; there were also attempts to show how literature reaches out for the sacred in the broadest sense, how it strives to touch the mystery of being, how it approaches religious texts, in particular mystical ones. In brief, there were endeavours to show

that the sacred provided a fruitful perspective for theoretical reflection in the study of literature.

There also appeared a number of more concrete problems of theory and method. One of them concerned the connection between "the aesthetic" and "the religious". Does the sacred element affect the aesthetic value of a literary work, and if so, to what extent? Another problem involved the relation between poetics and the sacred. The sacred may sometimes be the consequence of a particular type of poetics; on the other hand, the type of poetics may be the consequence of the sacral, ritual function of poetry. The vast range of problems related to the ways of representing the supernatural was the interest of many authors and participants in the discussion. Furthermore, the methodologically important problem of distinguishing and identifying religious literature was also raised.

There were a few attempts at historical generalization. A distinction was made between two currents of modern religious poetry: a mystic-philosophical current, and an anti-philosophical one, connected with everyday life. Another proposal, which drew on Romanticism, distinguished a visionary-prophetic trend from a rhetorical and didactic one. The text about liturgical theatre presented a vast view of contemporary religious drama.

The participants also came to realize the existence of certain areas that need to be studied on a larger scale. These are: biblical inspiration in Polish and world literature, an inspiration involving motifs, plot schemes, metaphors, models of coding and literary genres; the presence of theology in literature, man's relation to the sacred as inscribed in literature; the concept of God and the problem of evil, which also await study and deep critical reflection; finally, the fundamental problem of the language of religion and mysticism versus the language of poetry. This last question, all but absent from Polish scholarship, ought to be taken up as soon as possible. Czesław Miłosz wrote that to him the sacred use of language was the most interesting problem. The Church had abandoned a sacred language of great tradition by eliminating Latin from the liturgy. What could fill the place of the lost sacred language? Miłosz translates the Bible, the psalms; he wants to find in literature some equivalent for the sacred language, which he believes must always be present in culture. He wants to contribute to the creation of a modern Polish sacred language. The concern and the pains taken by our greatest contemporary poet ought to bring home to us the importance of the relation between the language of poetry and the language of religion, also as a research problem.

It seems that a major contribution of the Lublin conference has been to make us aware of the importance of the sacral dimension of literature. The sacred is usually found in works which are the highest manifestations of literary talent. The participants gradually came to realize that the conference dealt with matters of great, not to say vital importance for literature and for the Mediterranean culture as a whole; that it touched upon the foundations from which our culture arose and with which it is still linked. They saw that European literature as a whole could not

be interpreted apart from the great frame of reference constituted by Christianity and that these problems must not be avoided; on the contrary, it is our duty as humanists to tackle them, in consideration of our great cultural tradition. As one of the speakers rightly observed, it is impossible to escape one's own culture. That statement may well provide a deep justification for the Lublin meeting; as its motto, it could place it within a broader perspective, encouraging us to continue in our thinking and in our joint efforts.

*Maria Jasińska-Wojtkowska*  
*Stefan Sawicki*