

# The Theme of Religion in the British Metaphysical Poetry of the 20th Century (*Poetry of the New Apocalypse, 1939–1941*)

Pranešimas skaitytas mokslinėje tarpdalykinėje konferencijoje  
„Religinė patirtis ir tradicija“

Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas, Kaunas, 2012 m. gegužės 11–12 d.

The paper analyzes the transformation of the themes, poetics and stylistics of metaphysical poetry in the works of H. Treece, J. F. Hendry, N. Moore, T. Scott et al. associated with the Apocalyptic Movement in British literature. The material for the analysis is taken from their second anthology, “The White Horseman”, published in 1941. The poetry of the New Apocalypse is considered in comparison with the works of British and continental metaphysical poets of the 17<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (R. Crashaw, F. de Quevedo, G. M. Hopkins, et al).

The main focus is on the theme of religion. The paper explains the new configuration of traditional key themes (Religion, Death and Time, Love) in the works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century poets, and shows new details in their interpretation of the relations between God and man. The research concentrates on the development of certain motifs such as ‘the death of God’ (a motif known since Victorian times), and demonstrates several new accents brought to traditional issues within the theme of religion (e.g. the desolation of human being).

The paper also considers the new developments in the field of traditional poetics and stylistics of metaphysical poetry. The author analyzes the use of gospel paraphrases, polysemantic words and expressions, examples of word-play, etc. in the religious poetry of the Apocalyptic Movement.

The New Apocalypse, Apocalyptic movement<sup>1</sup> was a group of writers that came into existence in the UK in the late 1930ies. Unfortunately, this interesting phenomenon of British literature has not been properly studied yet. The bibliography of works concerning The New Apocalypse movement consists of about a dozen of articles, a few references in works on history of art and letters and a monograph *Poets of the Apocalypse* (1983) written by A. E. Salmon<sup>2</sup>.

Seven young authors: H. Treece, J. F. Hendry, G. S. Fraser, N. MacCaig, N. Moore, T. Scott and V. Watkins could be considered the core of the group. Their poems appeared in periodicals and later formed two anthologies: *The New Apocalypse* (1939) and *The White Horseman: Prose and Verse of the New Apocalypse* (1941)<sup>3</sup>. The third collection (*The Crown*

and the Sickle, 1945) presented a much wider circle of poets which scaled down its artistic integrity.

A. E. Salmon in his monograph outlines the history and offers a critical analysis of this literary movement. R. P. Draper in his recent article *The New Apocalypse* (1939–1945) describes the group as a part of the British literary process of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>4</sup>.

In my paper I intend to concentrate on the traits uniting the Apocalyptic Movement with metaphysical poetry. The term 'metaphysical' here is used in its literary, not philosophical meaning. European and American scholars (J. Smith, H. White, J. Duncan et al.)<sup>5</sup> used to classify metaphysical poetry as a 'style' with the accent on its connection with a certain epoch, its continuance and variability<sup>6</sup>. In a stricter meaning it is an independent trend of European literature formed in the Baroque, but not confined to that period.

The most characteristic feature of Metaphysical poetry is a special (*concors discordia*) type of metaphor called 'the metaphysical conceit'. Other leading characteristics include a catastrophic worldview, dynamics, tension, and established thematic structure (with the themes of Religion, Death, Time and Love developed in various versions of interdependence). The philological peculiarities of Metaphysical poetry include the preference for words with multiple meanings and a tendency to stress the element of drama in a poem by the means of grammar.

The structure of themes and motives in Metaphysical poetry can be described as fractal. The term 'fractal' here is based on the definition of B. Mandelbrot, who applied this concept to geometry<sup>7</sup>, and on the later interpretations of A. Fulton, R. Flores, T. Bonch-Osmolovskaya, I. Nabytovych et al.<sup>8</sup> who applied the fractal theory to the fields of arts and letters.

The poems analyzed in this paper are taken from the anthology '*The White Horseman*'. This book, to my opinion, contains the best examples of appropriate moments in worldview, themes and style. The content is mainly concerned with typological convergence, though G. S. Fraser names Donne and Spencer among the literary models of the group<sup>9</sup>. Other scholars add to the list of influences the names of E. Pound, T. S. Eliot, D. Thomas and H. Read.

The fact that this group of poets was formed in the period between two great wars, a time of change and crisis, proves the J. Smith's observation concerning the re-actualization of the metaphysical poetry in the crucial moments of history<sup>10</sup>.

The proximity of the Apocalyptic Movement to metaphysical poetry is evident in the catastrophic worldview identified by its eloquent title, which, in turn, could be explained by the complicated socio-political situation in Europe at the beginning of the World War II.

Feelings of injustice, universal disorder, the loneliness of man in a world separated from God, and the horror of fleeting nature of Time, that brings only bitterness, disappointment and grief, unite the poets of the New Apocalypse with their literary predecessors in the metaphysical paradigm.

It is only natural then, that the poets of the New Apocalypse develop three of the principal metaphysical themes: Religion, Death and Time. The structure of this thematic

complex, as indicated, could be called fractal or self-identical. The fractal nature of the themes in the Apocalyptic poetry becomes obvious in the constant interaction between all of them, and the dynamic interpretation of each.

Contrary to the established tradition of the British metaphysical poetry, which primarily develops the theme of Religion, the dominating position in the New Apocalypse poetry belongs to the theme of Time, while the theme of Death is a link uniting it to the theme of Religion. Such a configuration seems to be closer to the Baroque models of the continental metaphysical poetry, for example those of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Spanish writer F. de Quevedo. Furthermore, the close interaction of the themes of Death and Religion with the theme of Time could be confirmed by the title of the group. The idea of the Apocalypse supposes the ultimate solution of the problems of death and time in the sphere of the relations between God and man. As A. Zigenaus puts it: “the invisible Lord ... makes Himself visible. This is what... ‘apocalypse’ is” (my translation. – T. R.)<sup>11</sup>.

The “death of God”, a motif known to the English literature since Victorian times, is the most prominent element of the religious theme in the poetry of the New Apocalypse. The poets of the 1930-ies are depressed by the loss of their emotional contact with God, much like G. M. Hopkins SJ, the author of the *Sonnets of Desolation* written in the late 1880ies.

Though the position of these secular poets seems more reserved and remote, a closer look discovers in their works the sharpening of one of Hopkins’s cardinal thematic lines. When Hopkins tirelessly repeated that the Faith was Life, the young British authors half the century later formulated the same idea far more pessimistically: the unbelief was death, and in their time, in their society the threat was more perilous than ever.

However the level of tension varies from poet to poet. When N. Moor states that “to waken a God in a dream”<sup>12</sup> is impossible, he sounds more optimistic than J. F. Hendry in his *Sonnet in Wartime* with the pitiless: “They have killed Him”<sup>13</sup>. G. S. Fraser goes even further, stating: “And now there is no God, and who can forgive us, unless // We accord to each other mutual forgiveness?”<sup>14</sup>

But H. Treece seems the most unusual of them all. In his poem *The Ballad of the Prince*<sup>15</sup> he suggests a dramatic transformation of the gospel story, playing with several elements of Christian symbolism.

This author complicates the reader’s task as much as possible. He never explains who the “sobbing saviour tricked of heart and home”<sup>16</sup> in his poem actually is. Is he indeed The Saviour? The only name for the protagonist of Treece’s poem is “prince”. And this word has several meanings. Besides the most obvious: “a king’s son”, it could mean also “the monarch of a small territory”, “a sovereign”, “a high nobleman”, etc. In the Christian tradition “prince” is one of the allegories of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, and in this case usually is written with the capital letter (“the Prince of life”, Apostles 3:15). But the same word could also mean the Antichrist, written with a lower-case letter P (“the prince of this world”, John 12:31). Treece brilliantly tangles the matter, changing the case of letter P in the word “prince” several times in different parts of his poem.

Such an uncertainty combined with an open ending of the poem leaves the reader totally perplexed and increases the feelings of “global desolation”, loneliness of the man

in this world where there's "no news from God", as the title of the Spanish film *Sin noticias de Dios* puts it. However, this note of tragic loneliness accentuates the significance of man, his importance as an equal participant of dialogue with God. In Treece's poem this moment is stressed by an unusual description of the Saviour: "tricked of heart and home" (man's heart being the traditional home for Christ in Christian symbolism). Even the Saviour Himself is sometimes portrayed as "the man of blood, splayed on his cross of stars" (in N. Moore's poem *The double yew*)<sup>17</sup> reminding of the exalted and naturalistic images of R. Crashaw and other metaphysical authors of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The poets of the New Apocalypse enrich the theme of Religion with an interesting nuance. It seems the problem of faith, for the first time in the whole history of metaphysical poetry, oversteps the limits of the relations between God and man, becoming an aspect of the human relations. N. Moore's *Poem about Faith*)<sup>18</sup> could serve as a good example. It seems to be an answer to R. Crashaw's *Hymn in Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament*<sup>19</sup>, in which he states the importance of the *words* of faith: "Faith is my skill... Faith is my force. Faith strength affords // To keep pace with those powerful words", and at the same time stresses the importance of going further than just words: "...faith has farther here to go..."<sup>20</sup>

N. Moor's poem illustrates the functioning of the Baroque practices in the poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He accentuates the polysemantic nature of the key word "faith", giving it various meanings in different parts of the poem. The sense of the word "faith" changes according to the context, demonstrating the gradual passage from religious associations to the necessity of mutual understanding, trust and support.

The author creates something new from something old and well known. Avoiding any demonstration of his own religious creed and feelings, and stressing the importance of faith as a factor of human relations, the British poet however uses the customary gospel images and allusions. For example, "faith like a candle"<sup>21</sup> brings to mind the well known passages about light: "No man, when he hath lighted a candle, covereth it with a vessel, or putteth it under a bed; but setteth it on a candlestick, that they which enter in, may see the light" (Luke 8:16; see also: Luke 11:33); "Take heed therefore that the light which is in thee be not darkness" (Luke 11:35).

Even the statement about the 'egoism' of faith:

For faith is something that must act for itself,  
Having always the selfish end in view,  
For man is like man, and what man does  
For himself, he means for others too<sup>22</sup>.

In spite of all its outward impertinence, is a true paraphrase of a gospel warning: "And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise" (Luke 6:31). Similarly, "some act of kindness or inconsistency gives faith its true colour"<sup>23</sup> is a paraphrase of the proverbial statement about the helplessness of faith without deeds.

In general, the gospel metaphors in a text without religious meaning paradoxically increase the feeling of man's loneliness in the hostile world, his feeling of desolation and

detachment from God. It allows one to speak about the further sharpening of interpretations of the main metaphysical themes in the New Apocalypse poetry, thus proving its belonging to the paradigm of metaphysical poetry.

So, the New Apocalypse poetry, possessing a number of original traits, demonstrates a strong connection with the metaphysical tradition in themes, poetics and style. The contribution made by the Apocalyptic movement to the evolution of the trend, includes the consolidation of the thematic structure of British metaphysical poetry and draws it nearer to the continental models. This important innovation together with the sharpening of the traditional themes and the set of stylistic instruments aimed at achieving the highest dramatic effect, meets the general principle of the metaphysical poetry – economy of the means of expression.

The New Apocalypse group of poets marked a new stage in the development of British metaphysical poetry and opened a new and interesting prospect for studies in this field.

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> *Fraser G. S.* Apocalypse in Poetry // *The White Horseman. Prose and Poetry of the New Apocalypse* / eds. J. F. Hendry and H. Treece. Routledge. 1941. P. 3.
- <sup>2</sup> *Salmon A. E.* Poets of the Apocalypse. Boston. 1983.
- <sup>3</sup> *The White Horseman. Prose and Poetry of the New Apocalypse* / eds. J. F. Hendry and H. Treece. Routledge. 1941.
- <sup>4</sup> *Draper R. P.* 2011. 'New Apocalypse (act. 1939–1945)' // *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford University Press, 07b; online edition 2012 01 // <http://www.oxforddnb.com/templates/theme-print.jsp?articleid=96344>. Accessed 2012 08 30.
- <sup>5</sup> *Smith J.* On Metaphysical Poetry. *Scrutiny*. 1933. Vol. II. Nr. 3. P. 222–239; *White H. C.* The Metaphysical Poets. A Study in Religious Experience. New York; London. 1966; *Duncan J. E.* The Revival of Metaphysical Poetry. The History of a Style, 1800 to the Present. New York. 1969.
- <sup>6</sup> *Duncan.* Ibid. P. 4.
- <sup>7</sup> *Mandelbrot B.* The Fractal Geometry of Nature. New York. 1982.
- <sup>8</sup> *Fulton A.* Fractal Amplifications: Writing in Three Dimensions // *Thumbscrew*. 1998/9. Nr. 12 // <http://www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=12199>. Accessed 2012 09 07; *Flores R.* A Portrait of Don Quixote from the Palette of Chaos Theory // *Cervantes: Bulletin of the Cervantes Society of America*. 2002. Nr. 22 (1) P. 43–70; *Бонч-Осмоловская Т.* Фракталы в литературе. В поисках утраченного оригинала // *Textonly*. 2006. Nr. 16 (2'06) // <http://textonly.ru/case/?issue=16&article=9255>. Accessed 2012 08 30; *Набитович І.* Універсум Sacrum'у в художній прозі (Від модернізму до постмодернізму). Drohobych-Lublin. 2008.
- <sup>9</sup> *Fraser.* Ibid. P. 12–13; P. 20.
- <sup>10</sup> *Smith.* Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> *Цігенаус А.* Есхатологія: майбутнє сотвореного в Бозі. Transl. from German by O. Smetanin, V. Hrytsyuk. Lviv. 2006. P. 258.
- <sup>12</sup> *The White Horseman. Prose and Poetry of the New Apocalypse*. P. 110.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid. P. 59.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid. P. 70.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid. P. 35–49.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid. P. 44.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid. P. 98.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. P. 94–96.

<sup>19</sup> *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century. Donne to Butler* / ed. H. Grierson. New York. 1959. P. 128–130.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. P. 129.

<sup>21</sup> *The White Horseman. Prose and Poetry of the New Apocalypse*. P. 94.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. P. 95.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. P. 95.

Dr. *Tetiana M. RIAZANTSEVA*

T. Ševčenkos literatūros institūtas (Ukraina)