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The sacred in Polish folk tales ¹

With respect to reflection on traditional culture the sacred (*sacrum*) is one of the fundamental concepts. It refers to human relations with supernatural, miraculous sphere. It is often contrasted with the profane (*profanum*) – a secular, and thus lacking religious references dimension of life (see Eliade 2011). The sacred in Polish folklore was associated with a magical-religious discourse and found its proper place both within the lyric (in ritual songs) and the epic (especially in mythological stories, wonder tales and legends). Sacred perspective was used to depict both creation of the world and man as well as their subsequent lots, introducing for this purpose superhuman characters and/or objects to the storyline – of Christian origin, for instance: the Saints, the Virgin Mary, Jesus, God; or beings with no special religious background, such as: animals, old people or children as donators (Wróblewska 2005, 547-553). Depending on the genre, the sacred played a primary or merely complementary role (see. Kalniuk 2016, 31-32). In addition to functional relations folk narratives demonstrated structural connection with the sacred. Constitutive components of the "poetics of the sacred" included: autonomy of word, formulaic expression, repetition, parallelism, symbolicalness, the concept of time and space, and finally "dialogue with the cosmos" (Bartmiński 1995, 13-17).

Concept of the sacred was not explicit in the folklore of Polish village. Most frequently it took on the image of "the other world" (or the netherworld), and referred to people or things of unusual origin and/or miraculous qualities. For instance, one realization of the narrative thread T 574² "The Miraculous Staff" shows an old soldier dismissed from the service who "[...] meets another old fellow (and this was the Lord Jesus)". The Lord took pity on the poor man's misery offering him a miraculous requisite, which was to ensure welfare:

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² According to the classification of "The Systematic Catalogue of the Polish Folk Tale" edited by Julian Krzyżanowski (1962-1963).

“Just as you are so poor, I’ll give you a staff, such a cane; when you speak to it, it’ll give you everything you desire”(Kolberg 1962a (1865), 273).

The sacred order characters, like Jesus, are donators in wonder tales, and in etiological stories (in “The Systematic Catalogue of the Polish Folk Tale” threads T 2441-T 2999) – creators of the world or its constituents. In one of the accounts, realizing the thread T 2636 "Mushrooms", act of mushroom creation was associated with apostles' vices. The narrator contrasted (which is typical of legends, with which etiological tales remain in solidarity, see Ferfecka 2002) characterological weaknesses of the apostle with the perfection of Christ, and stressed in a moralizing manner the divinity and infallibility of the Creator:

At one time, Jesus and St. Peter arrived at a household, and the hostess gave them an oil cake with cheese. On the way, St. Peter got hungry and started to tear off small pieces of the cake in order to eat it, but every time he was about to put it to his mouth, Jesus asked him something. Peter wanted to conceal that he was having the cake all by himself, so he kept spitting the portions, and responded. Until finally he spat one bit, and Jesus asked him: »Peter, what lays there under the bush, is it the cake you’re carrying?« and St. Peter says: »But Lord, it’s a mushroom«. And the Lord Jesus says: «if so, let it be mushroom then« (T 2636. Cercha 1900, 110).

Particular elements of reality, such as: the sky, the earth, plants, animals, and even some utensils owed their existence to superhuman personalities. Act of creation often accompanied adventures of heroes, such as: God, the devil, the angels, the saints, and the Virgin Mary (see Podczaski 2012, 425-427). Their approach towards reality, presented in fairy tales, had a significant impact on the way in which space-time was valued. Elements favouring heroes gained clearly positive valuation, while the unfavourable ones were evaluated as negative. Realizations of the thread T 2442 “Flight of the Holy Family into Egypt” illustrated, for instance, how tree species acquired their properties and meanings.

When the Holy Mother with Little Jesus fled to Egypt, she found protection from the rain under the trees. All of them welcomed the Holy Mother under their leaves with great joy; one tree showed extraordinary kindness for the Mother of the Redeemer, and hung down the branches in order to shield Her even better from the rain. The Lord Jesus, thankful for honoring Him, gave the tree the shape that it had when covering Him and the Mother. The tree was a willow, henceforth called weeping; as you know, leaves of this willow hang down to the ground. But there was one tree which refused to shelter the Holy Mother and Her Sonny. It flicked the branches and indeed made a clear statement. The Lord Jesus got angry at the inhospitable tree and cried: »May you tremble all your life« And there it was. The tree was an aspen. Its leaves are trembling constantly (Świątek 1902, 253).

The sacred remained an integral part of existential experience of village subjects determined by tradition. Folk communicator was not always conscious of the religious contents he invoked. The saturation of texts with extraordinariness of characters, places, and events is to some extent a measure of traditionality. Although folklore narrative was not a normative religious discourse (expressing the *a priori* Ultimate Sacred Postulates, see Rappaport 1998, 288, 396) and was not an element of the ritual (some suggestions indicating this orientation were reported by Russian scholars, including Propp and Miletinski), yet it remained in clear relation with folk culture and its religiosity; the narrative was inspired by the culture, and modified its themes and motifs artistically. Within folklore transmission the difference was about the degree of saturation and the way of adapting the sacred, rather than its absence or occurrence.

The presence of the sacred in narratives has long been the subject of folklore studies. On this base academics sometimes tried to establish the correspondence between fairy tale and myth. Vladimir Propp, while seeking the wonder tale's genesis, used a combinational phrase: fairytale-myth (Propp 2003, 40). Genre-logic typologies were formed to distinguish between the sacred of a myth and the wonder of a fairytale (Jakuboz 2007, 33-33). Sacredness or wonder, which Julian Krzyżanowski regarded as fantastic (1965, 27), were clearly associated with mythical and fairytale narration. Due to organic connection joining folklore and group experience (through actuality, authenticity, and situational concreteness, see Pawluczuk 1981, 75) the sacred content, apart from its direct presence in folklore, constituted a definite reference system informing of what was relevant to the group (Sawicki 1988, 14-15).

In popular fairy tales multiple motifs and themes of the sacred indicate the role it played when it comes to perception of reality. Relations with a different order, with "the other world", in folk culture belonged to the basic kind constantly accompanying man somehow. The opposition sacred-profane (see Walendowska 1987, 323-326) or "this" and "the other world", existing in science, is of limited usage in folklore. It allows to illustrate the properties of both reality orders. In the context of traditional cultures and popular folklore distinct life spheres remained strongly intercorrelated (cf. Cassirer 1998, 143, 152-153). Autonomisation and specialization mark industrial and post-industrial communities. Yet in realness of oral and early-literate cultures, profane and religious elements were interconnected (see Goody 2012).

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