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Jan Józef Szczepański's Questions about the Meaning of Faith. Based on *Dziennik (Journal)*

1

Researchers into Jan Józef Szczepański have recognized the issues of individual faith, religiousness and the place of Transcendence in the modern world as constant and significant elements of his literary output.¹ After the writer's death, the public was given an opportunity to read his journal which constitutes an intriguing testimony of asking questions about the meaning of life, including the meaning of faith in an individual perspective, a particular autobiography.

Jan Józef Szczepański was writing his *Dziennik (Journal)* throughout his whole adult and mature life.² The first entry is dated 25th of June 1945. The twenty-six-year-old writer lucidly sets out tasks for himself giving the journal a therapeutic and pedagogical function: "This journal pursues an ambitious

¹See: T. Drewnowski, *Aneks do „Raportu końcowego,” „Pismo”* 1981, no. 2, p. 78; A. Sulikowski, „Nie można świata zostawić w spokoju”. *O twórczości Jana Józefa Szczepańskiego*, Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, Lublin 1992; S. Zabierowski, *Klucze do Szczepańskiego*, [in:] *Twórczość literacka i filmowa Jana Józefa Szczepańskiego*, S. Zabierowski [ed.], Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, Katowice 1995; B. Gontarz, *Pisarz i historia. O twórczości Jana Józefa Szczepańskiego*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, Katowice 2001; A. Werner, *Wysoko, nie na palcach. O pisarstwie Jana Józefa Szczepańskiego*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2003.

²Six volumes have been issued to date: Jan Józef Szczepański: *Dziennik*, Vol. 1: 1945–1956, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2009; *Dziennik*, Vol. 2: 1957–1963, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2011; *Dziennik*, Vol. 3: 1964–1972, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2013; *Dziennik*, Vol. 4: 1973–1980, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2015; *Dziennik*, Vol. 5: 1981–1989, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2017; *Dziennik*, Vol. 6: 1990–2001, Kraków 2019. I mark citations as Dz with volume and page numbers.

and difficult aim. It is to cure and educate me” (Dz1, p. 6). The importance of his daily notes is evidenced by a sentence which explains the assumed objectives: “I am writing it in order to give the qualities of responsibility to my resolutions, so that they cannot be spread, disappear in the fog of infertile spleen as so many times before” (Dz1, p. 6).

Initial parts of the diary indicate its intimate dimension, according to the characteristics of the narrative typical of confession, presenting “introspective insight reaching the depths of an individual soul”.³ Małgorzata Czermińska, a researcher into autobiographical forms, draws attention to the speaking subject’s self-turning relation when choosing the formula of personal records:

The writing process is sometimes compared to vivisection, it can be a difficult and risky act of self-discovery leading to surprising results. Introversive writing can be a kind of self-therapy and self-creation.⁴

Szczepański fills the first pages of his journal with self-assessments justifying the decision to undertake serious work on himself and forming the basis for the self-nurturing and self-education program. The precisely arranged plan includes points on ethical requirements posed to himself and others (“intransigence in the scope of ethical lifestyle” Dz1, p. 8), the importance of the intellectual horizon which needs to be deepened and broadened (“a question of more precise thinking” Dz1, p. 8), exercising will (to be “capable of clearly defined, strongly made decisions” Dz1, p. 8). The task plan also included “reconstruction of missed talents — at least the literary one so far” (Dz1, p. 7). Reading *Dziennik* — particularly the first volume — makes it possible to conclude that the author consciously uses the opportunities offered by the self-confessing attitude. The future writer often carries out meticulous self-analyses, assesses his performance regarding the established plan and the achievement of the objective. The diary is by no means a mirror for Szczepański’s narcissistic raptures,⁵ on the contrary — it is a tool of honest and responsible work on himself; In this respect, its self-therapeutic, self-creating (shaping) and self-educating functions are actually revealed. Reading the journal, however, allows to observe the evidence of

³ M. Czermińska, *Autobiograficzny trójkąt: świadectwo, wyznanie i wyzwanie*, [in:] A. Czermińska, *Autobiograficzny trójkąt. Świadectwo, wyznanie i wyzwanie*, Universitas, Kraków 2000, p. 19.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22. “Sometimes an imaginative process of studying one’s own self, viewed in the process of writing like in a mirrored reflection, turns into a conscious posing,” says Małgorzata Czermińska.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

a more fundamental task undertaken in it, namely to face the challenge of making sense of one's own existence.

2

Karol Tarnowski was aware of the banality and ambiguity of the term "seeking the meaning of life," although as a philosopher of faith and a historian of philosophy he himself did not abandon reflections devoted to this question. He explained the significance of the problem as follows:

What can be done about the fact that the problem included in the title is for a human being, whether they know it or not, deadly IMPORTANT. . . . Undoubtedly — although it is difficult to prove — this problem becomes particularly weighty during periods of civilization breakthroughs, loss of compass, disintegration of certain fundamental convictions.⁶

He indicated that it is particularly important to ask the question concerning the meaning of one's life, for it stems from an existential situation ("it is supported by strictly individual and non-transferable experiences") and implies a project of operation:

It is thus a totally practical question in which I somehow assess my life and, at the same time, I take it into my own hands in order to give it a certain direction to keep on leading it after realising its current course.⁷

In an individual aspect, as a fulfilment of individual capacity, the search for the meaning of life usually occurs in the time of youth, it is connected with the moment of acquiring a sense of freedom of choice, realizing one's own decision-making power and potential which can be developed. It occurs when we pose ourselves a task of shaping our own life. It may also arise in the face of evil or suffering.⁸

When Szczepański began to write the journal, his young years were already behind him but they happened in a special time. As a twenty-year-old he participated in the September campaign being recruited for the Kraków Army in military rank and the function of the artillery cadet. Then he operated in the AK conspiracy and fought in the AK guerrilla. During the war he lost his home and family property. Although his mother and sisters settled in Warsaw, he decided to stay in Cracow and after the war at the Jagiellonian University he continued oriental studies which he had started

⁶ K. Tarnowski, *W poszukiwaniu sensu życia*, [in:] K. Tarnowski, *Człowiek i transcendencja*, [introduction by] J. Tischner, Znak, Kraków 2007, pp. 26-27.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-38.

in 1938 at the University of Warsaw.⁹ His life experience did not differ from the experience of his peers, that is the 1920's generation. They took an active part in the war and conspiracy fighting for free Poland and their generational experience was the evil of war — Szczepański in one of his short stories described it as “the infection of death.”¹⁰ Evidenced by the journal record the project of self-nurturing and self-education was initiated in a breakthrough moment of the writer's biography: in the post-war return to normal life.

Reading the entries — especially from the first year — gives the reader an insight into the process of self-observation:

In general, my plan of rebuilding myself has so far been unsuccessful. I have very poor control over myself. I was supposed to learn, yet I do not learn, I was supposed to train myself in writing, yet I write still worse, I was supposed to develop strong will, yet I even cannot adapt a schedule of activities.

And I am not a better man. (Dz1, p. 24)

Similar observations are present on almost every page of the diary. Critical self-esteem (recognizing his own dilettantism, lack of technical means, inability to choose interests) forces the author to work on his shortcomings, to search for solutions.

It is very tiring to constantly sense the depth and simultaneously be unable to penetrate into anything. I lack technical means. I would like to analyse one sutra but I do not know the logic. When I write an article I realise that I do not have enough knowledge about politics or history. When I want to clarify my worldview, I have difficulties in finding the right categories. (Dz1, p. 25)

Yesterday, for the first time in a long time, I experienced a unique belief that I had written something good. I was so excited that I could not fall asleep. And again I felt quite clearly that my studies, my all activities are secondary and irrelevant, and that I do not see any other future for myself than the future of a writer. (Dz1, p. 30)

The diary records depict the drama of striving to recognize himself as an ethical man, as an individual who is capable of autonomous thinking and as a promising writer. They show a typical processual nature of “designing” life recapitulated by Tarnowski:

⁹ The almanac of the writer's life can be found in two books by Andrzej Sulikowski, *„Nie można świata zostawić w spokoju”. O twórczości Jana Józefa Szczepańskiego*, Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, Lublin 1992 and: *Jan Józef Szczepański. Studia i wspomnienia*, Wydawnictwo Print Group Daniel Krzanowski, Szczecin 2005.

¹⁰ See: J.J. Szczepański, *Buty*, „Tygodnik Powszechny” 1947, no. 6; in a book form published in: J.J. Szczepański, *Buty i inne opowiadania*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1956.

Initially it is not obvious either for the existence itself or (mostly) for its surroundings which possibilities are to be actualised. This means that the existence never really knows how a meaningful life can be guaranteed, it must create it in a "dialogue" with itself, with its surroundings, with opportunities and so on. Therefore the relationship with one's own capabilities is "designing" which carries a risk of confusion, but in the contact with reality it gradually obtains specific knowledge.¹¹

3

Szczepański's self-therapeutic and self-educating project did not assume formation of a religious attitude. The project includes the outline of action pragmatics and a rationally set goal, not any metaphysical premises which the author consciously (with perceptible irony) contests:

The awareness of the necessity of constant movement upwards seems to me a complete excuse, perhaps even a guarantee of the essential need for this movement.

Perhaps this is a result of a certain thought tradition, perhaps this is a manifestation of ambition, or whatever. I have no intention of going into such a metaphysical reasoning. (Dz1, p. 9)

Rather than analysing his religious attitude, Szczepański is interested in defining his worldview and rationalising an ethical system. He seeks in philosophers' books, raises questions about the source of moral prohibitions and concludes:

... in two cases I finally took a clear position: I recognise dualism of the world (spirit and matter), I agree with the Gospel ethics. Although in this second point I still have doubts about sexual ethics. (Dz1, p. 39)

The question of faith — religious faith¹² — appears owing to his future wife, Danuta Wolska. The writer first observes: "How movingly she tries to find a meaning of life. And how honestly." (Dz1, p. 103). Then, it seems, he notices a source of this attitude:

This religiosity of Danusia is a matter I have to take into account very seriously, it certainly will play a momentous role in my life. It is in any way connected with sanctimony. It is rather almost pagan fervour which makes

¹¹ K. Tarnowski, *W poszukiwaniu sensu życia*, [in:] K. Tarnowski, *Człowiek i transcendencja*, p. 38.

¹² Inspired by philosophical discourse I distinguish between religious faith and philosophers' faith. See: K. Tarnowski, *Usłyszeć niewidzialne. Zarys filozofii wiary*, Instytut Myśli Józefa Tischnera, Kraków 2005, pp. 36-37, pp. 173-255.

even the everyday events and things have this upper perspective, and God is involved in all, even the most trivial, actions. (Dz1, pp. 144-145)

The testimony of strong and authentic faith, truly referring to God as a transcendent guarantee of meaningfulness and coherence of life evidently affected Szczepański: “this is not trivialisation of faith, it is constant awareness of this other dimension and incredibly strong sense of dependence on it.” (Dz1, p. 145). Szczepański made such faith a reference point to ponder upon his own religious attitude:

I’ve been trying to avoid these things for a long time, to live as if I didn’t know about them. . . . A few days ago for the first time I tried not to understand but to feel the pressure of this inconceivable reality which I have never stopped referring to, although I have been doing it cowardly and deviously, or even worse — with the pose of literary curiosity. (Dz1, p. 145)

Szczepański does not confess that he negates metaphysical reality or reproach himself for being religiously indifferent (earlier he mentioned that he had been raised as a Catholic — Dz1, p. 82), he rather realises negligence of faith and an instrumental attitude towards it. The above statement makes it apparent that the religious beliefs of his future wife are an obvious impulse for the writer to incorporate the question of his own faith and spiritual life into the order of meaningful self-formation, of the full “self”:

Meanwhile, I clearly feel that without adopting a decisive attitude in this regard there is no maturity or full life. (Dz1, p. 145)

The passage in question suggests a boundary moment in the author’s spiritual biography, a breakthrough and a decision to take an attitude of commitment to faith assuming a qualitative change of life. However, further diary records illustrate his struggle with faith.

4

Prior to the marriage on several occasions the writer — both together with his fiancée and alone — attended catechetical teachings in the Benedictine Abbey in Tyniec, as Danuta remained in close spiritual contact with this monastery. After one of the important visits he wrote about his troubles:

Danusia requested me to talk to Father Piotr. The conversation lasted for more than 3 hours and did not bring any results, except for the one that I realised how far I departed from Catholicism not only in rational but also in emotional terms. Father Piotr tried to persuade me to confess my sins before the wedding. I did not agree to this and I couldn’t agree. It would be falseness difficult to swallow. (Dz1, p. 160)

Szczepański adopts an ethical attitude towards faith (Catholic in this case): he discerns the need to fully accept its truths and to believe in the consequences of religious practices. He is aware that it is unfair, especially towards oneself, to pretend faith. After many years he will more clearly formulate his opinion in an interview given to Krystyna Czerni:

It seems to me that it is essential, at least when it comes to sacramental life, that it can only be cultivated with total, unwavering conviction. If there is a doubt, using it is an abuse. I feel this way, at least in my case.¹³

Repeatedly, even at the end of his life, he will stand against hypocrisy in faith, giving this sphere of experience the primacy of ethical unambiguity:

Today I wrote ... to Kaziu Mieszki — the answer to his sad letter, in which he admits his departure from religion. From the depths of my own ignorance and helplessness, I shared with him only my personal conviction that pretending to have faith is worse than actual lacking the faith. (Dz6, p. 439)

Reading the first volume of the journal shows that Szczepański accepted an intellectual path of approaching faith. He assesses his attitude highlighting cognitive distance and thinking independence: "I see in myself a lot of resistance and plenty of what true believers consider to be pride. Actually to a large extent it is pride" (Dz1, p. 161). Szczepański's notes from this period reveal an ambivalent mindset both to theological issues and to his own religious attitude. He realized that faith cannot be acquired only rationally, that it belongs to an existential sphere of human beings who are also equipped with the ability to feel the mystery of infinity.¹⁴ An entry in which Szczepański commented on a lecture conducted for the academic community by the then-vicar Karol Wojtyła was symptomatic.

Yesterday [20th of April 1950] Danusia brought me to the so-called academic conference to St. Florian's church. There was a smart priest who was preaching without any pulpit ingratiation. By means of rational reasoning he proved God's existence and he spoke about God's qualities. I could not oppose this — so, logically thinking — I believe it. But this is not a religious belief because it lacks any emotions. (Dz1, p. 238)

¹³ *Każdy ma swój podręczny Panteon*. Jan Józef Szczepański interviewed by Krystyna Czerni, „ResPublica” 1989, no. 1, p. 89.

¹⁴ The philosopher writes about it as follows: "There is a certain synthesis of one's own *individual* experiences led by that 'sense of reasoning' which Newman so rightly described. This synthesis is also made possible by the type of culture and conceptual tools it operates, but it is done at the level of countless 'intuitions,' flashes of consciousness in the face of an ambivalently mystery of existence, and thus in the historical stream of a particular awareness marked by events." (K. Tarnowski, *Usłyszeć niewidzialne...*, p. 359).

Then he confessed helplessness of a sceptic in the face of Transcendence:

I know that if I could capture a little bit of the taste of "divine reality," I wouldn't hesitate. But it requires devotion and hard work. First of all, you need to gain humbleness. (Dz1, p. 239)

Dziennik proves that the author treated faith as an essential sphere of life and made efforts to enter into spiritual experience. He read mystics, attempted to systematically work on deepening his religiousness through daily prayer, although he also blamed himself for indolence:

At the moment I find it difficult to break myself to consider this religious matter. I sometimes have flashes of some concepts and ideas, then I forget. I usually do not want to think them thoroughly. And I know this is a burning issue. It is necessary — if I manage to believe — to reject this decisively, to stop making appearances. I still cultivate formality of the evening prayer which I imposed on myself a year ago. It was supposed to be the introduction into the realm of religious meditation but it has remained formality only. (Dz1, p. 281)

Declarations of faith and worldview self-determination take a processual form in the writer's case, they are inscribed in the dynamics which is expressed in the oscillation between faith and disbelief. On 26th of October 1950 the author makes a confession: "I'm not a material for a Catholic. Is it possible that each religion is nothing more than faith, embodying an irrational need for faith in anything?" (Dz1, p. 257). On 21st of May 1951 he takes a rational "yes" decision: "I have explained to myself that I believe in God and I think that if anything deserves faith, it is probably God." (Dz1, p. 281), the year 1955 summarizes the period of his inner desire of God: "It is terribly vague, powerless and shameful, but it still is." (Dz1, p. 598) Over time he finds the courage to declare disbelief: "In such moments [of a friend's death], I strongly feel practical discomfort of lacking faith. However, you cannot make yourself believe." (Dz3, p. 734, entry from 9th July 1972) Variability of the attitude we find in Szczepański's diary is part of the experience of faith which Paul Tillich finds in contemporaneity and describes as a sinusoidal movement.¹⁵

Most often, however, the writer admits to be agnostic. This attitude is close to spiritual anxieties characteristic of modern inhabitants of the West, on the one hand willing to find an answer to the continual movement of thoughts, on the other hand, being aware of their own intellectual limitations. Szczepański puts on himself the blame for the inability to take an unambiguous stand, he feels responsible for his cognitive incompetence,

¹⁵ P. Tillich, *Dynamika wiary*, [transl.] A. Szostkiewicz, [introduction] A. Kłoczowski, W drodze, Poznań 1987.

intellectual laziness as well as a lack of humbleness against the sphere which is inaccessible to reason. These self-accusations might be seen as part of the journal convention understood as a form of self-education and self-nurturing, however, reading of further volumes (in which the diary ceases to perform its original function, absorbs other autobiographical forms embracing their author's plurality of life roles and diversity of activities) allows to indicate the imperative of absolute intellectual integrity. This imperative is, as we know, the legacy of the Enlightenment ideas and Szczepański is aware of the irreversible consequences of this legacy including the vision of reality based on the paradigm of natural science and the fear that the object of faith is an illusion or deception, a product of human desires. At the end of his life he wrote: "Revelation is a boundary a layman cannot transgress." (Dz6, p. 460, entry of 24th March 1995) He previously admitted that the Catholic religion include the following problematic dogmas:

A peculiar type of evidence: a lack of any justification in the Scripture or tradition, but "the wisdom of the Church" realised that God demands a definition in this regard. I am absolutely not able to trust such a logic. (Dz1, p. 257)

In literary works (especially in the essays *Święty*, *List do Juliana Strykowskiego* from the volume *Przed nieznanym trybunałem*,¹⁶ *Raport końcowy* from the volume *Autograf*¹⁷) he defends the right of a scientist, researcher, and artist to examine while being free from dogmatism and justifies this right with an internal imperative of honesty and integrity in the pursuit of the truth:

Well, this is the biggest and most cruel paradox of the path to knowledge. This path is impossible. It cannot lead to a goal. And, at the same time, for someone who has chosen the path (because it was as if designated for them), it is the only way of duty — I would even say: the path of salvation — and abandoning it would be a betrayal.

For the writer scepticism is a matter of ethical attitude. Preservation of an ethical virtue — even though it has been given a soteriological sense — entails, however — and Szczepański's journal is an example — a drama of uncertainty, it prevents, contrary to Pascal's wager, taking an unambiguous decision about the faith:

Am I a non-believer then? And this is the core of the problem. Because my only "wager" comes down to the inability to overcome in any direction (practical overcoming) the antinomy matter — consciousness. This can be

¹⁶ J. J. Szczepański, *Przed nieznanym trybunałem*, Czytelnik, Warszawa 1975.

¹⁷ J. J. Szczepański, *Autograf*, Czytelnik, Warszawa 1979.

a matter of inability to think but it seems to me that over this gap there is no bridge which a man could build. The consequences I draw from here are really insufficient. It is not even a necessity of God's existence. It is a possibility. But in this possibility the whole hope is contained. (Dz2, p. 645, entry dated on 25th September 1962)

The last sentence of the quoted passage includes the word "hope" because the author knows that the meaning of life is impossible without a definitive point of reference. And he knows that God may be such a reference. There is a confession in *Dziennik* which seems to be significant as it is connected with the moment of self-reflexive recapitulation of life performed at a mature age (the writer is then 47 years old):

A thought or truth I would believe once and for all, according to which I would live believing in the absolute meaning of my own existence, would be enough. This could be, for example, a belief that there is God. (Dz3, p. 141, entry of 10th February 1966)

Jan Woleński, beginning a discussion devoted to the dialogue between believers and non-believers initiated by the editors in "Tygodnik Powszechny," repeated Pascal's recognition concerning the choice of each of the two attitudes (faith and disbelief) "in conditions of uncertainty". Declaring to be an agnostic he admitted that "religious rationality is much higher [than scientific rationality] because it provides believers with unheard comfort: the certainty of what he believes in."¹⁸ It seems that Szczepański was aware that he would probably never achieve such comfort: "Perhaps the only discovery of this kind accessible to human beings (to me at least), is that it is necessary to treat the existence which lacks certainty with all seriousness and dignity." (Dz3, p. 141) Philosophers of faith, however, observe that the "reason of faith" seeks, above all, a religious meaning of God which is crystallized not as "certainty" but as a "meeting": "The act of faith affirms God as a secretive presence, beyond a *veil* of each one and *despite* all that may constitute *dementi* for it."¹⁹ Søren Kierkegaard wrote about leap to faith over the absurd affirmed by reason.²⁰ In numerous fragments of his diary Szczepański emphasizes that he cannot afford such an act of faith.

¹⁸ *Odcienie tajemnicy. Religia i nauka: między konfliktem a dialogiem*. Adam Workowski interviews s. Barbara Chyrowicz, ks. Michał Heller, Łukasz Turski and Jan Woleński. Record of „Jaskina filozofów," debate of 6th of May, 2006 on the occasion of Tischner's Days, www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/odcienie-tajemnicy-125887?language=pl [accessed: 15th November 2018]

¹⁹ K. Tarnowski, *Usłyszeć niewidzialne...*, p. 361.

²⁰ See: S. Kierkegaard, *Okruchy filozoficzne*, [transl., introduction and commentary by] K. Toepflitz, PWN, Warszawa 1988.

In the face of his own inability to believe — or perhaps the inability to make the leap to faith — Szczepański searched for its confirmation in someone else's religious experience. He was reading writings of converts and mystics (Thomas Merton, St. John of the Cross) attempting to understand his own attitude by submitting it to verification with the source message of *homines religiosi*. Many times he spontaneously responded to testimonies of people he met, commenting not only on the authenticity of their beliefs but also on the effects of their life of faith he observed. *Dziennik* includes numerous observations similar to the record of an accidental meeting with Przemysław Mroczkowski (collaborator of "Tygodnik Powszechny," historian of English literature, professor of KUL):

His Catholicism is an absolutely ordered system and theological arguments do not sound embarrassing when he expresses them. Maybe it is not the most important thing in what you believe, but how you do it. To be organized towards oneself and the world — it gives strength and balance, and also, which is truly enviable: cheerfulness. (Dz1, p. 405)

The writer was deeply affected by the decision of his wife's relative who embarked on a religious contemplative life. He was impressed with the experience of faith in which he saw an example of life quality transformation. He described his agitation in detail:

I was intimidated by her concentration and cheerfulness, and also something which I cannot determine. It seems as if her energy, her interest in the world, her very young cheerfulness have suddenly taken another tone, as if they were their own mellowed echo. It is not possible to doubt for a moment that something immensely true, something exceeding any life-like triviality has occurred in her. . . . If I were a believer, I would say that I have found myself in the sphere of God's grace. It is like love, like longing or grief. (Dz1, p. 266)

Late passages in the journal contain an increasing number of comments on the testimonies of ethical heroism found in the Christian faith attitudes. The author respected what father Maximilian Maria Kolbe did in Oświęcim and recognized giving one's life for a stranger to be a manifestation resulting from absolute faith (Dz3, p. 680). He was particularly interested in examples of unconditional faith:

I am reading Bede Griffiths. Submission to the will of God is something that I cannot understand — it probably cannot be understood by anybody lacking clear awareness of God's existence. However, an example of such a life always makes me deeply bothered. I feel that making such an impossible decision can be the only solution, the only way to catch the meaning of life. (Dz4, pp. 214-215)

I am reading Thomas More's "prison letters". This man's courage has nothing to do with aggression or pride. This is Christian courage, based on tenderness and righteousness of conscience. The most beautiful one. (Dz5, p. 528)

The knowledge of faith Szczepański acquires from someone else's experience, which for him becomes a way of seeking religious truth through an empathetic reading.²¹ Other people's testimony of faith becomes an argument justifying the conviction of the meaning of faith as a factor shaping the meaning of an individual life, including his own existence:

I am reading Koniński's *Uwagi*. One more remorse that I do nothing to ultimately sort out my attitude towards existence, the world, myself. Is it possible at all? (Dz5, p. 647)

5

Dziennik reveals an individual condition that can be described as an inability to believe. However, Szczepański does not undermine the meaning of faith. As most of us, he realized the meaning of faith in the face of suffering and death of the closest ones, and of the experience of fragility of our own life, of transiting. The author's entries constitute a testimony of helplessness of a non-believer who is experienced by his mother's illness and death:

To believe that this painful ugliness is not the end, that there is something more beyond that. All the sense, the whole treasure of religion lay in this. Is it the memory of my mother alone which is going to remain? (Dz2, p. 334)

Then the questions about the meaning of human life affected by disabilities, pain, physical ugliness appear. Questions about the meaning of the horror connected with the end of existence, about the finality of death: "Is there any reparation for humans for this sad ugliness, for the violence of the last moments of life? Or at least an explanation?" (Dz2, p. 334)

These questions are formulated in the perspective of his mother's faith as the writer received a letter written by her right before her death in which she asks him to seek God:

I was very distraught by this voice which I have just received. It is completely cleansed, resounding only with what was important and true in Her. And I felt that the possibility of such thinking and feeling in humans puts them

²¹ More on the empathetic strength of a literary work, which allows to establish a spiritual agreement between the author and the reader in: Antonina Lubaszewska, *Poetyka doświadczenia duchowego. W stronę antropologii form literackich*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2009.

in a completely distinct category than the rest of creations. That could be a starting point. The spiritual world. Can the spiritual world not be eternal? (Dz2, p. 339)

Similar questions arise in the last volumes of the journal when the author experiences his own passing, realizes the closeness of his own death. The journal entries do not match the accuracy of poetic words or the precision of literary works composition (what differs both forms of expression is their purpose — one is pragmatic and the other aesthetic), however, Szczepański's diary also contains several literarily eloquent fragments such as the following one:

I am constantly tormented by my inability to cope with the task (and this is related to my fatally incapable writing) which in itself is hopeless and rather it can be located in the field of magic. It resembles the need to develop a spell against time, against insignificance. Yesterday we were descending from Kopieniec and each mountain was separated from others by its own thread of misty light, and the forests on the slopes were glowing with red gold beeches, and further they fell into soft pink, in cool violet, and the valley was covered by flat smoke of potato bonfires, and close, under firs, a damp darkness was rising. I was carrying a heavy backpack and a heavy basket with plums and I felt this weight and I saw it all, and I thought that I was living owing to this vision and this feeling of effort and astonishment. And I also thought that my Mother and Stanisław [Bolsęga], and aunt Kernowa had often walked this path at similar time experiencing life in the same way, and that, like them, I would soon be excluded from all this and that it imposed an obligation on me. (Dz3, pp. 678-679)

A number of issues which were crucial for the writer are accumulated in the above fragment. There is a description of a metaphysical experience when, in communion with the beauty, majesty and serene permanence of nature he experiences the essence of his own life — fragile and imperfect but focused on the question of its meaning. Also in this case Szczepański does not give an answer including certainty concerning measures to achieve a meaningful life, however, after recognizing the principle of generational succession in the circle of life, he mentions the obligation that rests on him. In the essay *Autograf* the writer had the courage to speak through a fictional character, a laureate of the literary Nobel Prize, and expressed hope that the true reward for writing is salvation. And that the path to salvation is:

To oppose to nothingness till the end. . . . It is crucial not to give up hope to believe in the ultimate meaning of everything. The ultimate and the only one.²²

²² J.J. Szczepański, *Autograf*, [in:] J.J. Szczepański, *Przed nieznanym trybunałem. Autograf*, Czytelnik, Warszawa 1982, p. 153.

The author, opposing both temporality and nothingness, confirms the meaning of faith, even though he does not declare it. The journal includes epiphany records of intuition of infinity:

Where does this feeling of guilt in life alone come from? Digging flower beds, weeding, chopping wood. Sunny weather, bird voices, the scent of blooming trees. And the constant suspicion that I do not deserve it. The constant presence of another dimension which as if invalidates the experienced moment... (Dz5, p. 455)

Late journal records include increasing number of notes on the necessity to make a general account.

I lack peace stemming from certainty. I am severely tired of my prolonged passivity. No decision, no effort undertaken. To write. My sins, my negligence, my cowardice hurt me. Increasingly I realize the obligation, the need to make an account of life. What I wrote in *Autograf* — salvation — this is the only important matter. Perhaps it is achievable for me solely through writing. (Dz4, p. 605)

The author incorporates the vocabulary of religious concepts into his questions about the meaning of his own life: guilt, compensation, gratitude... “To settle, to summarize your stay in the world. To decide. On what? To write this only book which is important, to repent for my sins, to make account.” (Dz5, pp. 455-456) With this confessions he returns to the beginning when he sought a horizon justifying the meaning of his vocation:

Creating, especially writing, is a desperate effort to reach something stable which can be based upon while facing passing, appearances, unimportance of all your endeavours. (Dz1, p. 429)

As in the art perceived by successive generations he sees the aspect of immortality of human life.²³ He also writes about it in the journal:

We have just listened to beautiful English music from the 14th and 15th centuries. The music of the composers and singers continues to exist despite their rotting bodies. Their feelings are still alive. (Dz6, p. 256)

Szczepański's last writings include questions and answers filled with hope that “there is something beyond this here” and that:

²³ See: B. Gontarz, *Poszukiwanie Transcendencji w pisarstwie Jana Józefa Szczepańskiego*, [in:] *Literatura i wiara*, A. Sulikowski [ed.], Wydawnictwo Print Group, Szczecin 2009.

The mere possibility of asking such questions seems to testify to the existence of another and more lasting reality than the one available to reason and to our senses, the one whose only trace is our consciousness.²⁴

Beata Gontarz

Jan Józef Szczepański's Questions about the Meaning of Faith. Based on *Dziennik (Journal)*

Abstract

The starting point for the author of the article is to recognize Jan Józef Szczepański's *Dziennik* as a testimony of self-nurturing and self-education. The journal records show the processual quality of "designing" life by the author. The purpose of the article is to characterize the drama of inability to believe presented in the journal in the perspective of the philosophy of faith. The analysis of the writer's attitude leads to the conclusion that his objection to temporality and nothingness is a confirmation of the meaning of faith, despite the inability to decide which Søren Kierkegaard called the "leap to faith". The article also contains a reconstruction of Szczepański's views on writing as the opposition to passing, which is his individual path to add meaning to his own life.

Keywords: meaning of faith, agnosticism, religious experience, leap to faith, philosophy of faith.

²⁴ J.J. Szczepański, *Jeszcze nie wszystko*, [in:] J. J. Szczepański, *Jeszcze nie wszystko*, Baran i Suszczyński, Kraków 1997, p. 79.

