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## Idea of right application. Robert Frost’s motive of *going beyond* rightly applied to spiritual issues

If – as it has been said – poetry can fruitfully influence spirituality, it means that there is also a need to examine this from both literary and theological perspectives along with their own methods in order to get a deeper understanding of it on its theoretical and practical levels. Here I propose to show how the poetical motives of *going beyond* withdrawn from Robert Frost’s poetry could be transferred into the field of Christian spirituality so as to produce effects related to the issue of personal development. The whole conception may be presented as three kinds of *beyond* in the following speculative order: the poetical motives of *beyond* are applied to the outer frame, which is *beyond* the threshold of strict analysis and interpretation, and it is there that they animate acts of the soul’s progress and wherefore they mean *beyonds* in the sense of crossing spiritual lines. Such a transition will be considered by virtue of the idea of the *right application* (of a poem) in its two forms of the *yes-* or the *yes but-* application, put herein as a proposition of explanation of this fascinating process.

### Idea of right application

At the beginning point of this consideration, the difference between two attitudes to a given text must be singled out. The first – **an analysis** – consists in uncovering the complexity of meanings which constitutes *sensus operis*.

The reader's attentive activity tends to show the objective relations among various, or preferably, all the parts of literary communication which means that conclusions – despite being incomplete – are justified by the examined text. In practice, he or she formulates a hermeneutic strategy – a kind of theory – which is still being approved or disproved by textual elements to come.<sup>1</sup> The reader's leading question could sound like the following, "How do I understand *what* has been said?" He or she strictly respects meanings put in the text and addressed to a potential or real recipient. However, every act of perception emerges in some frame so each text is taken in a certain context. The words, "How clever you are" sound like praise but sometimes the special appearance of a face would bestow an ironic tune on that statement. The proposition of context which explains a text is its **interpretation**.<sup>2</sup>

Apart from such hermeneutics, each text can be treated in an arbitrary way according to the reader's imagination, will, mood or even phobias. Indeed, this very popular manner exists far from the text itself. When a walker finds a bottle with a letter inside he can read it and propose a coherent strategy of understanding or to say better explaining that. Then the reader analyses it and when he asks circumstances of this fact, recognizing the paper as 'a letter' sent by someone for some reason or goal, then he interprets it. Furthermore, on the one hand the reader can follow some instructions included and wanted to run for help, while on the other hand starting with a wrongly written word 'hellp' he may see the text as a grammatical issue or on the basis of the similarity of 'hell' and 'hellp' he may draw some odd conclusions. In the two former cases the walker reads the text out of its intention [*sensus operis*] deforming its coherence.<sup>3</sup> This is neither an analysis nor interpretation but **using a text** outside its inner program. In contemporary culture this specific way of exploitation became very popular deriving from such ideas like post-modernism, a reader co-producing senses, deconstruction etc. As a result it could easily happen that Shakespeare's words might be interpreted differently from what he had, or assumed to have, in his mind. In order to retain honesty these two ways, analysis-interpretation and using the same text, must be divided. However, the given text can be transferred along the line logically led from itself but having

<sup>1</sup> U. Eco, *Nadinterpretowanie tekstów*, [in:] U. Eco et al., *Interpretacja i nadinterpretacja*, red. S. Collini, przeł. T. Bieroń, Kraków 1996, p. 45–65.

<sup>2</sup> B. Chrzastowska, S. Wysłouch, *Poetyka stosowana*, Warszawa 1987, p. 37–51.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. U. Eco, *Pomiędzy autorem i tekstem*, [in:] U. Eco et al., *Interpretacja i nadinterpretacja*, *op. cit.*, p. 66–87.

crossed the threshold of analysis-interpretation. The problems of demarcating this border constitute one of the most troublesome yet wonderful features of the human condition.

Hence the third intermediate way which can be called as the interpreting use of a text or **the right application** arises. It means that the semantic structure of a text, as fully respected, is secondarily applied to the case placed *beyond* the proper intention of the work, that is *beyond* the analysis and the first or direct interpretation, just needed to understand the text itself. Thus, the right application can be called the second or *indirect* interpretation, in which the reader draws on the capacity of a text in order to connect it especially with his or her own case doing it mostly through symbolization or allegorization. On the one hand this attitude remains the kind of interpretation of the text whereas on the other hand the reader's reaction and the case external to what is directly suggested by the text function as new real components of the whole reading. If a priest thinks himself to be a good shepherd, he respects that this is Jesus who is primarily the good shepherd (cf. Jn 10) but he also crosses the line of strict prediction and *applies* the text to his own situation. This is a classical way of allegorical enlargement but sometimes the connection between a text and a situation may be more arbitrary. The right application could take two general forms: 1) *yes*-application when the meanings of a text substantially correspond to the reader's situation or 2) *yes but*-application when some of them contrast with his or her belief or condition of the situation and therefore the reader gives his or her supplementing response.

Here some examples of this *right application* derived from Robert Frost's poetry<sup>4</sup> and based on the motives of *going beyond*, they are presented in order to show the perspective of re-reading them within the new context of spiritual development. In the head of an amateur religious poet the question arises of how to refer valuable lines to ease his or her inward journey.<sup>5</sup> This wish appeals to the Horatio's idea of joining pleasure and moral utility of a poem

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Frost. *55 wierszy*, red. S. Barańczak, Kraków 1992. Cf. *Z Tobą, więc ze Wszystkim*. 222 arcydzieła angielskiej i amerykańskiej liryki religijnej, red. S. Barańczak, Kraków 1992, p. 260–265; S. Barańczak, *Wstęp*, [in:] *Robert Frost. 55 wierszy*, *op. cit.*, p. 5–36.

<sup>5</sup> The question of personal effects of reading is exemplarily marked with the following words: "Everybody knows the feeling of freedom, of relief, of increased competence and sanity, that follows any reading in which more than usual order and coherence has been given to our responses." I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, New York 1925, p. 235; cf. p. 228–238.

(*prodesse et delectare*)<sup>6</sup>, the fundament of Western poetry.<sup>7</sup> Even an atheist's words could profit here but this American poet is not of that kind of genre. Consequently, the level of analysis-interpretation will coexist with the level of the right application.

## Poetical examples

### Stopping by woods on a snowy evening

One of the Frost's best known verses contains in a lyrical message inscribed into a short narration about a horseman who stopped 'by woods on a snowy evening'. Unseen by anyone and 'misunderstood' by his horse, he remains suspended far away from the area of ordinary life symbolized by 'a farmhouse' so as to contemplate the winter nature. The quiet image of the woods 'fill up with snow', '[the] frozen lake' along with 'easy wind' and 'downy' snow contrasts with the rest of the world. This experience of nature means a while of rest which is what a man really needs since he dedicates his time to such an "ineffective" action. In 'the darkest evening of the year,' which may render also a spiritual mood, he finds what is the positive contrast. However, the poem finishes with a conclusion:

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,  
 But I have promises to keep,  
 And miles to go before I sleep,  
 And miles to go before I sleep.

The refreshing experience of the winter, 'lovely' nature is confronted with the burden to be carried that is depicted by some 'promises to keep' and by the wonderfully repeated verse: 'And miles to go before I sleep'. The plural of 'promises' and 'miles' – additionally doubled – suggests a lot of issues to come. The line when divided in its middle reveals two dimensions essential for the poem: 'And miles to go' evokes work while 'before I sleep' concerns some final resting

<sup>6</sup> "Poets wish either to profit or to delight; or to deliver at once both the pleasures and the necessities of life [...]. He who joins the instructive with the agreeable, carries off every vote, by delighting and at the same time admonishing the reader." Horace, *Ars Poetica*, [in:] *Classic Writings on Poetry*, ed. W. Harmon, New York 2003, p. 71–72.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. W. Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, vol. 3, ed. D. Petsch, New York 2005, p. 72.

up to death. It turns out that a while of contemplating rest must be replaced with a further way and with what is signified by it, or in other words, that the first *being beyond* – in a distance to the world – yields the second *going beyond* – to the world and tire again. The two last lines contain a gentle plaint, a silent iambic sigh<sup>8</sup> which expresses the truth about the human condition but maybe the poet's peaceful attitude towards hardship, which indicates that a power full of dignity can be stated too.

It is not difficult to notice that this experience can be used within the circle of religious and spiritual questions. Among them the tension between contemplation and work distinguishes itself. Man finds himself in a situation being a source of peace, which as opposed to previous difficult duties, invites him or her to rest here for longer. Gazing at nature can be now enlarged up to its Creator and then the verse would stir a typical religious need. Although contemplation means a privileged sign of love of God, its time is limited by the circle of cases linked with the love of neighbors. At the highest level that was depicted in the scene of Christ's transfiguration. His disciples' experience of great mystical exaltation was finished with the necessity to descend to the world and to the cross waiting there. Despite wanting to stay on the mountain and saying, "It is good that we are here" (Mk 9:5) they were obliged to step down to take up their own crosses (Mt 10:38). Also St. Bernard of Clairvaux expounds on the moment of leaving contemplation for an apostolic care of people.<sup>9</sup> A believer is faced with an imperative to make such a transition not only in the mystical but also in his or her everyday life. It occurs when religious relief is followed by the prospect of unpleasant cases, 'promises to keep' or allegorically understood 'miles to go'. It is enough to say that this moment is crucial in the spiritual progress and that a time of spiritual rest is strictly needed for work, just to mention the Benedictine motto *Ora et labora*.<sup>10</sup> The experience of the verse which is described by virtue of analysis can be projected on to the spiritual reality and help the reader to become a better faithful person. Since substantially the whole content of the poem corresponds to the spiritual frame, it is a good example of the right *yes*-application.

<sup>8</sup> J. Fenton, *An Introduction to English Poetry*, New York 2002, p. 51–55.

<sup>9</sup> T. Merton, *O świętym Bernardzie*, tłum. E. Dąbrowska, Kraków–Tyniec 2005, p. 39–81. Cf. T. Špidlik, *Theoria i praxis. (Kontemplacja i działanie) (Szlakiem Grzegorza z Nazjanzu)*, [in:] *Homo meditans*, vol. 2: *Kontemplacja i działanie*, red. W. Słomka, Lublin 1984, p. 45–57; W. Słomka, *Kontemplacja. Działanie. Apostolstwo*, [in:] *Homo meditans*, *op. cit.*, p. 79–93.

<sup>10</sup> T. Špidlik, *Theoria i praxis...*, *op. cit.*, p. 54–55.

## The road not taken

The motive of a man standing in front of two different roads pertains to human tradition as its considerable part. Frost displays the question of choice in his beautiful metrical stanzas. Three of them are dedicated to a subject's observation, fluctuating awareness and emotions accompanying the moment of making a choice and reflected on an iambic tetrameter as much as the sequence of alternately non-accentuated and accentuated syllables suggests "going ahead," something to come. Only one of two roads can be taken by one traveler confronted numerously with them. Both roads are similar in respect of being used before (9–10) but at the given moment they are equally covered with a stratum of untouched leaves (11–12) – a picture of the equal possibilities.

Staying at the beginning point, the poet is provided with a clear consciousness that each choice is linked to another one and further on as "way leads on to way" and therefore the first act will bring the next consequences which will preclude a traveler from a way back. This knowledge of future fate is very general but also actual so it is known that an inevitable decision will entail consequential inevitable effects forming the lasting life. But the poet relates everything from the perspective of choice which has just been made. He took the second way only for the reason that it was more grassy (8) and "less travelled by" (19) – the differentiating detail. The fact that the subject had only this one indication to make his choice of life importance<sup>11</sup> and knowing nothing specific of his future evokes some dark climate developed later in existentialistic thought. Man seems to be lost in the labyrinth of reasons and consequences; he must go for an option knowing very little about it. Frost's road "less travelled by" exposes that some personal traits – being more prone to risk or not – play here the main role and that a choice depends on one's inner life but it does not exclude its accidental and "blind" character. All this is crowned by the last stanza:

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
 Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
 Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –  
 I took the one less travelled by,  
 And that has made all the difference (16–20).

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<sup>11</sup> Notice that even a stratum of leaves lying equally on both roads at the moment of a decision deletes a number of possible choice-factors.

The suspension with doubled 'I' (18–19) render the personal share in the process, resulting in a formed life, to be mentioned much later as consummated but impossible to be diverted.

The above analysis – concentrated on the motive of going *beyond* the threshold of decision – can be as a whole *rightly applied* to the question of the (Christian) spiritual way because it expressively stresses that a choice makes an unavoidable part of human life; that every decision triggers a chain of consequences and that it is impossible to come back to the former point to restart a life. At this point the pre-existentialistic poem meets the Christian teaching on man, especially its personalistic philosophy and theology. Against the fact that everybody makes choices that lead to ultimate consequences a personalist would stress that one's every little choice, act or decision determines his or her life making it in some respect impossible to be retracted.<sup>12</sup> It evokes the ideas of self-possession, self-rule and self-determination by which the truth that every positive act of the will forms the ontological substance of man.<sup>13</sup> Obviously, the prospect of God's supernatural intervention essentially modifies this way – as much as a sinner becomes a saint – but the message of the poem is still valid. Firstly, God's grace is an object of human free choice; secondly, even though the work of grace radically alters man then life is a continuous shaping process not coming back to *tabula rasa*. Just here the difference between Christian and the poem's thought clearly emerges. Indeed, a Christian knows incomparably much more of the indicators of choices, of the power of grace, much more than 'grassy road'. This Christian wisdom does not cancel the content of the verse but it rather forms its dialogue supplement. The question of the *right application* means that the capacity of the poem retains its truth because it is still possible for somebody to have only *less* awareness. The dark climate of a poem is a point of reference for a man who has *more* to say; it partly confirms the human general truth about necessity of choice but also helps to make himself or herself a better believer. However, the sense of the poem is respected and applied on the whole to the new frame of Christian teaching to get a new supplementing answer. The poetical motive of *going beyond* in the sense of making

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<sup>12</sup> See: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1730–1738, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENGOOI5/\\_INDEX.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENGOOI5/_INDEX.HTM), 10.10.2016; cf. A. J. Sobczyk, *Podstawy życia duchowego według Katechizmu Kościoła Katolickiego*, Lublin 2005, p. 69–72.

<sup>13</sup> K. Wojtyła, *Osobowa struktura samostanowienia*, [in:] K. Wojtyła, *Osoba i czyn oraz inne studia antropologiczne*, Lublin 2000, p. 423–432; cf. K. Wojtyła, *Osoba i czyn*, [in:] K. Wojtyła, *Osoba i czyn...*, *op. cit.*, p. 151–191.

decision gains its new light coming from *beyond*. Thus, the poem ought to be treated as true personal data to be partly affirmed and partly fulfilled with the greater message. That is why the right *yes but*-application appears here.

### Birches

Furthermore, the question of the right application of a poem arises in Frost's splendid *Birches*. The poet starts with the image of birches bent to the ground and next he leads out a line of meditation. Although such an observation is close to religious customs, here something more will be said. The fact of birches being deformed is explained firstly by the power of nature when the snowy and frosty weather causes a permanent change in their vertical position and secondly by the fictional description of a boy playing with them by "riding them down over" (29), like a horse, making it his personal art. Against that background the poet declares that he really wants to do something analogical: "So was I once myself a swinger of birches" (41) that means to go up or *beyond* his normal life portrayed as a dense forest ("like a pathless wood" [44]). Now he feels tired with 'considerations' and suffers from them like someone breaking through branches and twigs. The birch becomes a sign of such a need and wish and its trunk illustrates the way from earth up to heaven. But the last proclamation contains a surprising connotation:

I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree [...],  
 Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,  
 But dipped its top and set me down again.  
 That would be good both going and coming back.  
 One could do worse than be a swinger of birches (54–59).

The climbing which signifies man's desire and effort to go beyond present life is diverted by the equal wish to be stopped and turned back to earth. The way from earth to heaven is thought to be unaccomplished and one birch joins both realities together. In this reciprocal dynamic state the poet sees the best solution. Thus, the figure of "a swinger of birches" signifies that man's personal attempt is confined by the objective reality like climbing is conditioned by the springiness of a trunk. Ultimately, but after all he accepts and wants this limitation.

At this point it starts to be seen how the analysis made hitherto could be next *rightly applied* to the circle of religious life. The movement from the world *beyond* present problems up to heaven appears as a well understood motive



affirmed by traditional imagination. By contrast, a birch putting a man to the ground seems to say something opposed to that tradition – pulling out of heaven and return to pre-beyond. However, it must be said that the whole content of the poem is respected and related without disfiguration to spiritual life as the *right application*. Like in the case of *The Road...* the poem analysed above appeals as such to the reader's mind and is open to be supplemented by his or her personal answer. Hence going towards earth with the help of a birch may be taken as something *beyond* the Christian belief forasmuch man ought to go straight to heaven. But the same reciprocal movement when read as a wish to be in contact with earth and humanity, because earth is “the right place for love” (52), can be considered as the need to connect what is divine and earthly or as a voice behind staying a human.<sup>14</sup> This case expresses the very Christian belief of the constant union of both dimensions widely justified by the truth of Creation, Incarnation and Resurrection, which exposes humanity not being left behind or disregarded but wanted, approved, redeemed and divinized.<sup>15</sup> As a conclusion, the broad poetical formula may be secondarily interpreted in different ways depending on the reader's background and attitude. The “Christianizing” option suggested above is allowed because it meets a criterion for the *right application* which means that the meaning of the poem is employed as much as possible in the new reading but with no contravention. Obviously, such treatment would be the right *yes but*-application.

Finishing the consideration let it be said that *the right application* that is the transition from poetry to spirituality is a very fruitful way. Here the experience awoken by reading a poem can stimulate spiritual life by means of similarity between them. What is easier to be caught could serve what seems to be more abstractive just like a sensual observation stirs the mind. The bodily analogy

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<sup>14</sup> The approach towards earth could be exemplified within Frost's world by his *regionalism* with such pertinent traits of his verses like using a local New England dialect or their “pastoral quality” (see: [Robert Frost], <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/robert-frost>, 2.10.2015). However, the popular statement that he was clear of religion and mysticism must be verified at least in the context of ‘Birches’ as well as many other poems.

<sup>15</sup> It is also easy to notice the parallel between *Birches* and *Stopping by Woods...* in respect of going from the better to the less exciting state. As to the theological depth of the relation between earth and heaven see: M. Godawa, *Obraz Tajemnicy. Wcielenie i Narodzenie Pańskie w retorycznych medytacjach wybranych autorów środowiska krakowskiego w pierwszej połowie XVII wieku*, Kraków 2015. See also: A. Słomkowski, *Teologia życia duchowego*, red. M. Chmielewski, Ząbki 2000, p. 32–42; R. Rolheiser OMI, *W poszukiwaniu duchowości XXI wieku*, tłum. K. Tybinka, Kraków 2006, p. 143–145.

stresses that both dimensions – art and religion – contrasted so often should be recognized as one holistic apprehension of human life.

## Conclusion

- introducing the category of the *right application* seems to be useful to show how a text can be transferred *beyond* to another area, here of spirituality;
- *the right application* means that 1) the whole semantic content of a text is respected and as such 2) it is applied to the next case which is noticeably outside analysis and the strict (first or direct) interpretation just needed for understanding the text itself;
- for this reason *the right application* may be called the second or indirect interpretation and could be carried out as allegorization or symbolization;
- the meanings of a text can substantially correspond to the reader's situation (*yes-application*) while at another time some of them may contrast with his or her belief or condition of the case hence the reader is provoked to give his or her supplementing answer (*yes but-application*);
- the reading experience of a poem activates and strengthens the management of spiritual problems as it was exemplarily exposed in Frost's poetry;
- the field of inspiration depending on a situation, as well as the reader's contribution, is wide open and with its whole capacity it affirms the fruitfulness of such an application;
- the transition from poetry to spirituality expresses the holistic apprehension of human life;
- consequently, Frost's motives of *going beyond* while transferred *beyond* poetry produce a progress – spiritual *beyond*.

## ABSTRACT

The first aim of this article is an attempt to explain some terminological questions in the field of texts interpretation, here especially of poetry, which bears the character of a theological source (*locus theologicus*). This aim has been achieved by the idea of *the right application* of a text, which means respect for its original meaning and at the same time the transition of this meaning *beyond* the line of direct analysis and interpretation to an outer circle of religious and spiritual issues. This idea in its two forms of the *yes-* or the *yes but-application* shows how reading poetry can stimulate life decisions and shape somebody's spiritual attitude.

The second aim of my paper is to expose the right application through the motive of *going beyond* which has emerged from the poetical work by Robert Frost – one of the most outstanding and prominent artists of the twentieth century.

### KEY WORDS

*the right application* of a text, the *yes-* and the *yes but-*application, Frost's motives of *going beyond*, spiritual experience, crossing spiritual borders

### ABSTRAKT

Pierwszym celem niniejszego artykułu jest próba uporządkowania pewnych terminologicznych kwestii w zakresie interpretacji tekstów, szczególnie poezji posiadającej status miejsca teologicznego (*locus theologicus*). Ów cel został zrealizowany przez propozycję wprowadzenia pojęcia *właściwej aplikacji* tekstu (*the right application*), która oznacza pełne respektowanie oryginalnego znaczenia tekstu z jednoczesnym przeniesieniem go poza granicę ścisłej analizy i interpretacji do kręgu problematyki życia duchowego i religijnego. W swoich dwóch formach, aplikacji pozytywnej (*yes-application*) oraz warunkowej (*yes but-application*), *właściwa aplikacja* ukazuje, jak czytanie poezji może stymulować życiowe decyzje i określać kształt duchowości.

Drugim celem artykułu jest praktyczne przedstawienie tej idei poprzez opracowanie motywu *przekraczania granic*, zaczerpniętego z poezji Roberta Frosta, jednego z najwybitniejszych i wspaniałych artystów dwudziestego stulecia.

### SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

właściwa aplikacja tekstu, aplikacja pozytywna i aplikacja warunkowa, motyw *przekraczania granic*, doświadczenie duchowe, przekraczanie duchowych granic

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