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From the History of Artistic Interpretations of the Biblical Story about the Lazarus Resurrection

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The story of the biblical character Lazarus, who was resurrected by Jesus, has repeatedly been the subject of numerous debates among the interpreters of the Bible. The artistic embodiment of the plot in the works of art is of the equal interest. The article discusses the most paradoxical versions of the Biblical story, which appeared in the second half of the 20th century. Among them are the novel of the Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis "The Last Temptation of Christ", in which the relationship's line of Jesus and Lazarus is detailed, a novel by Nobel prize winner, Portuguese writer José Saramago "The Gospel According to Jesus Christ" and a cantata by the Italian composer Azio Corgi "La morte di Lazzaro" ("Death of Lazarus"). By analyzing the structure of the cantata's text the author reveals the specifics of the realization in the plot and semantic space of the original artistic idea of Saramago – "no one on Earth has sinned so grievously, to die twice ...". Corgi's Cantata becomes a kind of philosophical reflection on the eternal theme of life and death.

Keywords: Gospel, the story of the resurrection of Lazarus, interpretation, cantata, text structure.

*None of us wants to die, but the artist while creating
talks about it in a more obvious form.*

José Saramago

No other Gospel story (after the story of the resurrection of Christ) caused so many controversies between the interpreters of the Bible as the story of the resurrection of Lazarus.

Lazarus (literally "God helped me") is the Biblical character, a resident of Bethany, a brother of Mary and Martha, who was resurrected by Jesus Christ. The story of the miracle of his resurrection is in the chapter 11 of the Gospel of John.

According to the Gospel, the resurrection of Lazarus of the Four Days was made by the Lord in the presence of numerous witnesses and many of the Jews who had come to Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in Him (John 11:45). Having heard about the miraculous resurrection of Lazarus, the Jewish chief priests and the elders decided to kill Jesus himself and the one that was resurrected by Him (John 11:53, 12:10). According to an ancient tradition, reported by

the St. Epiphanius of Salamis, Lazarus went to the island of Cyprus and later there he was made a bishop of the apostles. After his resurrection he lived 30 years. Constantinople Synaxarion says the apostle Peter himself made Lazarus a Bishop.

Even today many people claim that the story by John is not true, and the main argument is the fact that there are no references about the even in the other Gospels. At the same time, there are interpretations that explain this fact, and what's more, emphasize the need to include this episode into the Gospel narration.

A.P. Lopuhin in "Bible Commentary" gives his own explanation to the fact that only John mentions the resurrection of Lazarus. He believes that the evangelist wanted to show going-to-die Jesus, who didn't lose the power to resurrect, it was important for him to describe Him as a master of life and death.

Bishop Cassian Bezobrazov says:

"St. John's story of the Resurrection of Lazarus has no parallel in the synoptic tradition. Meanwhile, as the miracle it has nothing equal in the Gospel. It tells about the resurrection of the decomposing corpse that has been lying

in the tomb for four days. More than that the resurrection of Lazarus influenced the course of history as well. For the hostile to Jesus Jewish leaders, it was the last incitement that made them decide to eliminate Jesus" [Bezobrazov].

Throughout the history of European art the plot of the resurrection of Lazarus attracted attention, first of all the attention of artists. One of the first images dates from the IV century. It is followed by the wonderful series of frescos and paintings by Rublev, Giotto, Tintoretto, Rembrandt and many others.

In literature from the point of the diversity of metamorphosis (in the string of images, that was created by the artistic practice) Lazarus, of course, can not compete with Faust, Mephistopheles, Hamlet and Don Juan. However, his "life" in this field of art is not less interesting.

As the example there is a poem by the Russian philosopher Alexey Stepanovich Homiyakov (1804-1860):

Воскрешение Лазаря (*Resurrection of Lazarus*)

О, Царь и Бог мой! Слово силы
Во время оно Ты сказал, -



Giotto. The Raising of Lazarus



Tintoretto. Resurrection of Lazarus

И сокрушен был плен могилы,
И Лазарь ожил и восстал.
Молю, да слово силы грянет,
Да скажешь «встань!» душе моей, -
И мертвая из гроба встанет,
И выйдет в свет Твоих лучей.
И оживет, и величавый
Ее хвалы раздастся глас
Тебе – сиянью Отчей славы,
Тебе – умершему за нас!

Let me recall that in one of the chapters of the novel by Dostoevsky “Crime and Punishment”, Raskolnikov comes to Sonia and asks to read to him about the resurrection of Lazarus from the Gospel of John¹.

There is a curious analogy with the story of Lazarus in the quatrain of Boris Pasternak’s poem «Bad Dreams» in the novel “Doctor Zhivago”²:

И сборище бедных в лачуге,
И спуск со свечою в подвал,
Где вдруг она гасла в испуге,
Когда воскрешённый вставал...

The novel by the Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis “The Last Temptation of Christ”, which appeared in 1951, is immensely interesting. Three years later the book was forbidden by the Vatican, and in 1955 Kazantzakis was excommunicated from the Greek Catholic Church. The plot line of Jesus and His friend Lazarus is detailed in the novel. Kazantzakis deals freely with the Gospel story of the resurrection: this episode is presented as a story of an old man, who was a witness of the event “... the land in the tomb began to move and cracked, the gravestone began to move and slowly, slowly started to rise ... And here we saw two hands of the yellow color, and then already turned green, cracked head that was covered with ground, and finally we saw the bony body, wrapped in a shroud ... He lifted his one foot, than the other and came to light. It was Lazarus” [Kazantzakis]. The attempt to kill Lazarus

after the resurrection is described even more curiously in the novel.

In 1988 a film based on the novel was created by Martin Scorsese, film scripted by Paul Schrader. After the film release the book by Kazantzakis started to be in a special request. We can assume that this was the impetus for the appearance of the novel “The Gospel According to Jesus Christ” by José Saramago (1991) – a Portuguese writer and Nobel Prize winner in Literature (1998).

It is incredible, but after the publication of this book that would have been called one of the most scandalous events in the literature of the late XX century, Saramago would repeat the fate of Kazantzakis.

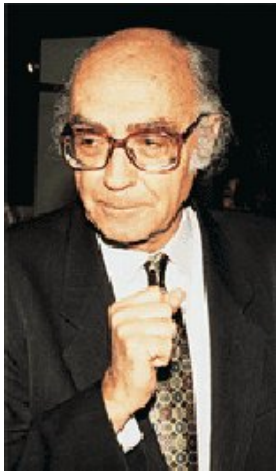
The Portuguese authorities considered the book by J. Saramago to be offensive to Catholics. It was excluded from the list of works that took part in the literary competition of the European Union. Despite the fact that the novel was eventually restored to the list, J. Saramago left Portugal in protest and all the following years of his life lived in Spain on the Canary Islands.

The story of Lazarus appears on the final pages of the novel “The Gospel According to Jesus Christ”. From the outset the attention is drawn to the free description of the Gospel events: the arrival of Jesus to Bethany, his coming to the house of Lazarus, where on the floor (!), on a mat lied the dead, Jesus’ sobbings at the sight of this picture. Next quotes from the chapter 11 of the Gospel of John (with the exception of 11:22 and 11:26) enter the text:

11:21. Then Martha said to Jesus: “If only you had been here, Lord, my brother would never have died.”

[**11:22.** And I know that, even now, God will give you whatever you ask from him.]

11:23. “Your brother will rise again,” Jesus replied to her.



11:24. “I know,” Martha said to Him, “that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

11:25. “I myself am the resurrection and the life,” Jesus told her. “The man who believes in me will live even though he dies”.

[11:26. and anyone who is alive and believes in me will never die at all. Can you believe that?”]

11:27. “Yes, Lord,” replied Martha. “I do believe that you are Christ, the Son of God, the one who was to come into the world.”

Following this J. Saramago offers its own version of events that differs from the canonical one.

St. John the Evangelist writes when Jesus saw Mary weep, He was “deeply moved and perturbed”. (Gospel of John 11:33). By his order the cave – the burial place of the deceased – is opened. Jesus “called out in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out! And the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with grave-clothes and his face muffled with a handkerchief. “Now unbind him,” Jesus told them, “and let him go home.” (Gospel of John:43-44).

Let’s compare the above episode with the version of J. Saramago in “The Gospel According to Jesus Christ”: “And Lazarus would have stood

for so God wanted, but at the last minute – that’s really true and the last limit – Mary Magdalene, put her hand on His shoulder and said these words: No one has committed so much sin in his life that he deserves to die twice...And Jesus lowered hands and went out, weeping» [Saramago, 2007: 428].

In Saramago’s work Jesus doesn’t resurrects Lazarus!

For the first time, as far as it is possible to establish this possible angle of reflection of the stories about Lazarus was foreseen by the Archbishop Richard Trench (1807-1886), an Anglican theologian and literary man. In his work “Notes on the miracles of our Lord”, he writes:

“Jesus beheld all the terrible meaning of death, of this sinful duty. In front of His eyes in the image of a small man there were all the disasters of humanity. In front of Him He saw all who complain and all the graves. For if he was ready to wipe away the tears of the future friends and for a brief period of time turn their sorrow into joy, that, as a matter of fact didn’t change the state of affairs: Lazarus would be resurrected, but soon again would taste the bitterness of death” [Trench, 2010: 242].

Surprisingly, the Archbishop draws attention not just simply to the value of death “in the small image of one person,” which fits well the context of philosophical and aesthetic pursuit of the Romantic era. But he also says that Lazarus would have to taste the bitterness of death again!

After nearly half a century this idea will be continued by Saramago: nobody in the world sinned so grievously to die twice ... A friend of Jesus Lazarus did not deserve such a fate.

The new art form incarnation the story of Lazarus gets in the cantata “La morte di Lazzaro” by the Italian composer Azio Corgi, as there can be seen the manifestation of a feature that shows the transformations of the contemporary culture (see NikonovaS., 2012).



The idea of the cantata appeared in 1994. The composer informs about it in his letter dated June,3 to José Saramago³. There he writes that his new work is ordered for the choir of Teatro alla Scala and the performance should take place in Milan's Church S.Ambrogio during the holy week of the following year. At the end of the letter there is a curious question:

«...conosci il libro del gesuita Byrne il quale sostiene che probabilmente la risurrezione di Lazzaro non è mai avvenuta?» (...Are you familiar with the book by a Jesuit Byrne, who supports the idea that the resurrection of Lazarus probably never happened?)

The same name also appears in the text of the preface to the cantata which the composer accompanied his work. Corgi discusses in details the book by Brendan Berne "Lazarus – Gospel of John 11, 1-46", that was published in Turin in 1994. From this we can conclude that among the impulses caused the birth of the ideological concept of the cantata was this publication, and it naturally connected to a well-known to the composer version of Saramago's novel.

In particular, Corgi says that for Bern the appearance of the story of the resurrection of Lazarus was caused by the fear of death that was so widely-spread in ancient times. In

various religions as well as in the contemporary philosophy, this theme – "How to pass the end of life and support life after death" – is also being actively discussed.

Bern comes to the conclusion that Azio Corgi formulates in the following way: "the only antidote to death is faith that gives common life to the other side of life and to the other side of death and that is received from Jesus." After that the composer indicates that for Saramago «no one committed such sins in life to deserve to die twice." Both (Bern and Saramago) describe the feelings of suffering, anguish before one's death but in different ways. For him, as to a composer, it is also very interesting "to take part in the "description of the feelings" in a situation where the mankind, now, alas, is the only individual that is a direct witness and a participant in these events."

Bern is among those who question the veracity of the story of the raising of Lazarus. Moreover, he says that if "Lazarus is simply resurrected for a certain period time and then dies again, thus he would spare his life, and will not live long."

"Jesus is struggling between his love to his friend and pity for those who cannot come to terms with the death of Lazarus, in this way protest against death, which "is a part of human nature"." Science has taught us to believe that death is a natural phenomenon. However the "primordial emotions caused by death – is the prospect of our death, pain and confusion due to the death of others – remain strong at all times."

Thus Corgi's interpretation of the story of Lazarus in the event-built aspect is set with the accordance to the idea of his non-resurrection, because he has not sinned that much to die twice. From the point of view of the emotional and psychological aspect Lazarus gives the opportunity to describe the "strong at all the

times,” feelings, which are pain and confusion that arise in all those present at the sight of the death of a loved one, for this is a foreseeing of the prospect of one’s own death. Perhaps this explains the unusual composition of the instruments included in the score by Corgi: three tubes (C), three trombones, timpani and a very large group of other percussion instruments that is meant to be used by five performers.

A mixed choir that is boys’ choir and vocerecitante is combined with the tough enough and “cold” (“chilling”) from the timbre point of view of instrumental coloring. It is not an accident that lamentable choral phrase-crying “Oh, Lazarus, my brother!” has become an original leitmotif of the cantata. It acts as an emotional sign, in which the composer realized the need “to describe the feelings” of suffering and pain, caused by the bitterness of loss, but also the fear of opposition to one’s own death. However Corgi doesn’t limit himself to these two plans and complicates the semantic and artistic spaces of the cantata, by creating typical to his work discrete text structure.

In the mentioned above letter to José Saramago dated 3.06, Corgi announces the editing of texts from the works of the writer who intends to use for his new cantata. He points out the sources from which the text is borrowed; these are the novels by Saramago “The Gospel According to Jesus Christ” (1991), “Baltasar and Blimunda” (1984) and the play “In Nomine Dei” (1993). Among other thing the composer includes fragments of Psalms to the libretto. Corgi pays particular attention to the distribution of texts between the performers:

“a Maria di Magdala viene affidata la parte dell’historicus (è una voce recitante-attrice);
il Coro I sviluppa il sogno di Matthys;
al Coro II sono affidate le lamentazioni salmodiche;

il Coro di Voci bianche, che partecipa all’urlo sulle parole “Talità Kum”, pronunciate da Gesù per risuscitare la figlia di Giàiro, canta frammenti salmodici;

le voci Maschili e Femminili appartenenti ai due Cori danno vita rispettivamente ai personaggi di Gesù e Marta/Maria;

l’unione dei due cori realizza il canto di Blimunda”.

“Mary Magdalene is entrusted the part of the narrator (voce recitante);

Choir I performs the text of Psalms;

Chorus II tells the dream of Mattis;

The boys’ choir sounds with the words “Talità Kum”, uttered by Jesus to resurrect the daughter of Jairus, and

sings of psalms fragment of Psalms;

Voices of male and female choirs accordingly transmit characters of Jesus, Mary and Martha;

In the joint sound of two choirs the text of Blimunda is used “

As you can see, the text structure of the cantata “is built” by Corgi from the fragments of the works, that are from the plot point of view are almost not related. Across the Gospel narrative, the text fragment of the Mattis’(the hero of the play “ In Nomine Dei) sleep is interspersed, “ where the words “Rise and go” are perceived as a call to the Anabaptists to go and fight for their faith. But the most interesting thing is that in the text of the play Saramago also mentions Lazarus:

“And then you get up, as Lazarus got up from the death bed, for a living person is like a dead man, until Lord comes to him with the words:” Rise and go ... “

The composer also uses the text from the dialog between Blimunda and Baltasar from the novel “Baltasar and Blimunda”:



At the premiere of the cantata by A. Corgi

Никому нет спасения и никому нет погибели.

Греха не существует, есть только смерть и жизнь.

Умирает то, чем были мы,

Нарождается то, что мы есть

Вот почему мы не умираем навсегда.

In addition the limes from 101 Psalms of David (3, 4-6, 10) are used.

By putting together the mosaic pieces of various text fragments, the composer is trying to build a kind of philosophical dialogue about life and death between them.

All this makes a 3-part composition that includes a prelude, coda and instrumental interludes between pieces. Besides due to the specifics of the performers – the presence of voce recitante and choirs, their dramaturgical functions, we can say about the implementation of the traditions of Passion (of the responsory type). Voce recitante becomes similar to the part of an evangelist, who narrates the story. Choirs are close to the choirs-turbæ that express the reaction concerning the events, and besides indicate a generalized, symbolic, narrative plan.

The boys choir plays a special role in the cantata. First of all because children voices have bright timbre⁴. For Corgi Coro di voci bianche

(as we assume) becomes a sort of catalyst that changes the direction of the artistic sense of the cantata, by rising it to a new level.

Perhaps that is why the boys choir “Talita Kum” opens and ends the piece, it forms an intonation and architectonic arch. On its thematic basis another boys choir would be build. This choir is repeatedly found in the cantata “Light up my eyes, Lord, because he does not sleep in death.”

According to its sounding the choir “Talita Kum” (“Rise and go”) resembles a children’s counting-out rhyme or humorous catchphrase. The simplicity of the rhythmic pattern (two eighths and a quarter or, as an alternative, two sixteenths and eighth), a small range, high register, texture (soprano and alto’s alternation on the principle of “echo”), orchestral accompaniment (ringing tone of the bells: Campane tubolari (tubular bells) Campane alastra (plate bells) and Glockenspiel (metallophone) – all this creates a feeling of unpretentious original children’s play⁵. It breaks down by a shriek (urlò) that is written out in the choral parts. After that there are the words Vocerecitante: “... [They] realized immediately that a misfortune happened!” The very same shriek will be pronounced before the text vocerecitante in the final as it plays an important dramatic function:

“And Lazarus would have stood for so God wanted, but at the last minute – that’s really true and the last limit – Mary Magdalene, put her hand on His shoulder and said these words: No one has committed so much sin in his life that he deserves to die twice...”

Following him reappears boys choir: “Lighten my eyes Lord, because he does not sleep in death.”

Thus, *urlo* marks the plot as well as the denouement of the narrative about the death of Lazarus.

In the introduction to the cantata Corgi says that children do not accept any form of violence. Therefore from the point of view of the plot the shriek can be considered to be a form of protest of the child’s consciousness against Lazarus’ forced return back to life. Children are against the “non-natural” (unnatural) death.

Thus Brentano Bern’s thoughts concerning the inevitability of death, its biological justification in connection with the artistic comprehension of natural unity of life and death at Saramago’s («... no one has a destruction, sin does not exist, there is only life and death, what we were dies, what we have is getting born») [Saramago, 2002:444]) supplements in the Corgi’s cantata with the artless simplicity of children’s philosophy concerning natural relationship of life and death.

That’s why in the code of the work the composer brings together all these “meanings” and synthesize the main thematic material of the choirs that have previously sounded in the cantata:

male choir I and II

Oh, Lazarus, my brother!

choir I (soprano, tenor) and II (altos and basses)

There is no salvation, no loss, sin does not exist, there is only death and life. Death comes before life, and who was dead is born again, and we do not die forever.

boys’ choir

Talita Kum!

And they sound simultaneously and connect contrapuntally. As if in a kaleidoscope the replica are whizzing by, “Lazarus, my brother, death, life ...”. Gradually the sound of the boys choir “Talita kum” comes in the forefront, which starts as from a distance (*pp*), amplifies to *f*. The choir «Talita kum» not only in a tessitura way towers over all other voice parts, but in the end it absorbs all the sound space.

It all comes back to the original artistic and semantic impulse which is a child’s play. A complex, associative game with the meanings of texts that are taken from origins and are not related to the plot. This game is framed by the composer to a very original frame. In the introduction to the cantata Corgi writes that for the children’s mind there is no motivation life-death ratio. That’s why in the last time of the cantata the composer distributes the syllables of the words «morte» and «vita» among the voices of the chorus, connecting them vertically, thus symbolizing their indissolubility.

In the end, we present another piece of the preface, where Corgi quotes the interview of J. Saramago (Turin, 1990):

“Apart from the desire to write, every writer has two other needs: to be loved madly and doesn’t want to die most of all.” And he continued to add the words by Marcus: «Death appears not as the end of existence in reality, but rather as the only possible completion of love ...»

¹ In 2002 in the theater «School of Dramatic Arts» Boris Milgram staged the play «The Raising of Lazarus,» which based on the five chapters of «Crime and Punishment» by F. Dostoevsky.

² Out of the 25 poems that finish the novel by B. Pasternak “Doctor Zhivago” six are written on the subjects of the canonical Gospels. One of them is «Bad Dreams», it is analyzed in details in the article by P. Iaroslavskii «Some of the intertextual relations of B. Pasternak’s poem» Bad Days «» (Iaroslavskii P.)

- ³ The Letters and materials about the cantata (including the Preface) were given to the author by the composer Azio Corgi from his personal archives.
- ⁴ Here we can see the certain parallel with Matthäus-Passion by J.S.Bach, in which there a choral in the first number of the boys choir.
- ⁵ All Italian researchers of Corgi's creative work point of his tendency to ludus.

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Из истории художественных интерпретаций библейского сюжета о воскрешении Лазаря

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История о библейском персонаже Лазаре, воскрешенном Иисусом, неоднократно становилась предметом многочисленных споров толкователей Библии. Не меньший интерес представляют и художественные воплощения сюжета в произведениях искусства. В статье рассматриваются наиболее парадоксальные версии библейской истории, появившиеся во второй половине XX века. Это роман греческого писателя Никоса Казандзакиса «Последнее искушение Христа», где подробно выписана линия взаимоотношений Иисуса и Лазаря, роман португальского писателя, нобелевского лауреата Жозе Сарамаго «Евангелие от Иисуса» и кантата итальянского композитора Ацио Корги «La morte di Lazzaro» («Смерть Лазаря»). На примере анализа текстовой структуры кантаты выявляется специфика реализации в сюжетно-смысловом пространстве оригинальной художественной идеи Сарамаго – «никто на свете не согрешил столь тяжко, чтобы умереть дважды...». Кантата Корги становится своеобразным философским размышлением на вечную тему о жизни и смерти.

Ключевые слова: Евангелие, сюжет о воскрешении Лазаря, толкование, кантата, текстовая структура.
