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The Issue of Health and Disease in *The Labyrinth of the World and Paradise of the Heart* by John Amos Comenius

Zagadnienie zdrowia i choroby w *Labiryntcie świata i raju serca*

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Abstract: This paper examines the function and significance of the issue of health and illness in the literary and philosophical-religious discourse of John Amos Comenius. Research shows that the mental foundation of *The Labyrinth of the World* is based on the dialectics of health and illness, which for the author becomes the equivalent of good and evil, truth and falsehood, eternity and temporality, spiritual perfection and vanity. The culpable physical degradation of man is, in Comenius' work, a source of temporal suffering, and it also derails the chances of gaining spiritual perfection and, consequently, makes it impossible to get closer to God.

Keywords: Comenius, *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart*, health, disease, Baroque

Streszczenie: Przedmiotem badań w niniejszym artykule jest funkcja oraz znaczenie zagadnienia zdrowia oraz choroby w dyskursie literackim i filozoficzno-religijnym Jana Amosa Komeńskiego. Badania wykazują, iż myślowy fundament *Labiryntu świata* oparty jest na dialektyce zdrowia i choroby, która staje się dla autora ekwiwalentem dobra i zła, prawdy i fałszu, wieczności i doczesności, doskonałości duchowej i marności. Zawiniona fizyczna degradacja człowieka jest w dziele Komeńskiego nie tylko źródłem cierpienia doczesnego, ale przekreśla szanse na uzyskanie doskonałości duchowej, a w konsekwencji uniemożliwia zbliżenie się do samego Boga.

Słowa kluczowe: Jan Amos Komeński, *Labirynt świata i raj serca*, zdrowie, choroba, barok

Comenius' *The Labyrinth of the World* is a Baroque allegorical poem that requires the reader to make a kind of exegetical effort to reach the meanings hidden behind the veil of images and figures (Magnuszewski, 1973: 91). At the same time, it is a mirror (*speculum*) that is a visualisation of certain

virtues, especially prudence, humility, chastity, justice, or temperance. Moreover, it is hard not to get the impression that the author does not dispense with educational accents here, including health. It is also worth adding that *The Labyrinth of the World* is, on the one hand, a handbook for spiritual life and is part of the widespread trend of this kind of writing characteristic of Baroque culture, while on the other hand, it is a practical guide. This guidance character of the work refers not only to a conscious choice of a life path (profession), but also to a lifestyle in its spiritual and health dimension. In a word, Johnn Amos Comenius' *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart* is one of those works of the European Baroque whose potential for meaning continues to intrigue researchers-readers (Kopecký, 1992: 48; Havelka, 2018: 5-27).

The protagonist (Poutník) of *The Labyrinth* appears as a man heading along the path of inner emancipation. This is not an easy path, as it is not only fraught with temptations of a carnal and material nature, but also made difficult to discern by habitual judgements, opinions, and habits. In the work, they acquire a tangible, personal shape (Searchall Ubiquitous [Všezvěd Všudybud] and Delusion [Mámení]), accompanying the protagonist on his journey through the city-world (Lehár, 1974: 53-64). The props with which the main character is equipped, glasses and a bridle, are an expression of their reign. These objects make it very difficult for the protagonist to move freely, form judgements, and express opinions.

This article focusses mainly on the issue of health and illness, their oppositions and tensions, which, in the researcher's opinion, become the building blocks of Comenius' philosophical and religious discourse. It seems that the whole mental framework of the title work grows out of the opposition of what is healthy and what is consumed by disease, and thus good and bad, true and false, temporal and eternal, perfect and flimsy. Adopting a strictly anthropological perspective, one can see that Comenius, in his reflexions on man's purpose and destiny, starts from the rudiments of corporeality and man's relation to his physicality. The management of the body becomes a challenge that is no less important than strictly spiritual issues, or, to be more precise, the attitude to the body determines the inner condition of man. In other words, a body that escapes the control of the will and the mind becomes a ballast that prevents spiritual growth. Physical degradation becomes not only a source of suffering but also, more

annoyingly, it cuts off the chances of gaining spiritual perfection and becoming like and closer to God Himself.

Undoubtedly, Comenius' vision of the world and man has a biblical origin. The story of the creation of human beings, at its beginning, is marked by the original sin. The tainted human nature, subject to the absolute law of mortality, becomes the centre of the New Testament Christian revolution. It brings the hope of eternal life, which is devoid of care, but also of disease. In his work, Comenius reveals and confronts two visions of life, the first of which (subject to criticism) is based on the desire to possess and consume beyond limits, while the second is its opposite, based on modesty, moderation, and spiritual work.

In *The Labyrinth of the World*, the reader is confronted with a personified death, which has its medieval origins. Its cultural images, showing its warlike nature, were recalled, for example, by Johann Huizinga in his synthesis, *Autumntide of the Middle Ages* (Huizinga, 2020). In Comenius' work, she is an archer who sends her arrows into a crowd of people without any order, disregarding the age of the victims, their material condition, or their social position. This is no longer an image of the orderly medieval procession of the danse macabre, but a vision of the disorder or randomness, and perhaps even absurdity, that determines temporal existence.

Already in the opening chapters, the protagonist of the work notes the fatal corporeal condition of the human race. In chapter seven, he perceives people who are scarred not only on the face, but also on the whole body. Their bodies were consumed by illness, with leprosy, ulcers of various kinds, and traces of smallpox known on the surface (Komenský, 1978: 282). Death moved among them and inflicted wounds on them. Many of them were mutilated (probably in some kind of accident), and others were disabled (lame, blind, deaf, with a weakened mind, the dazed). Some of those hit by the arrow of death assumed monstrous proportions, resembling bloated bladders; others were characterised by unnatural thinness or even dryness. There were also those who shook "like an aspen", which could indicate neurological diseases (Komenský, 1978: 285-286). The pilgrim, looking at these people, notices that the vast majority of them are suffering from some kind of illness (they are injured, and their limbs are rotting and paralysed).

Comenius complements this sad picture of human suffering with remarks about primitive traders in pharmaceuticals. They prescribed various ointments or vodkas, which were readily used by the sick, although with poor

efficacy; for this did not prevent the heartless death from continuing to wreak havoc on the living (Komenský, 1978: 286). Moreover, the sellers of dubious medicines also became its victims. At the same time, the pilgrim sees a notable paradox here – people are, as it was, preparing these deadly missiles for themselves. They are synonymous with lifestyle, especially sexual impurity, as well as carelessness about health as such, including ignoring internal and external wounds (Komenský, 1978: 287).

Further parts of the text refer to apothecaries who, blinded by the lust for profit, did not inquire into the causes of particular illnesses. Furthermore, harmful things were sold to people as healthy, leading many to premature death. The medical profession also seemed untrustworthy to the pilgrim. In particular, the procedure of medical examinations, including the testing of the smell and consistency of fumes and impurities, and finally the clumsy attempts to treat individual patients, seemed peculiar to the protagonist. He noted that for the most part these efforts were ineffective and that the sufferers died amid complaints about the incompetence or negligence of the medics. Comenius also paints a picture of an operation in which the patient's limbs were cut off and the entrails penetrated. This literary image corresponds in some ways to the art of the period, including Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (1632).

During his travels, the protagonist of Comenius' work attracts the attention of the different states of the materially and legally diverse 17th-century society. He is particularly interested in their health and, above all, their spiritual condition. In this context, the condition of the craftsmen, who were particularly exposed to various types of accidents and health ailments, seems to be a frustrating one. In light of the text, it can be seen that many began to suffer from deafness due to the noise of the forge. Others suffered burns. Those working underground died as a result of sinkholes and landslides (Komenský, 1978: 292). The pilgrim's reluctance was also aroused by the down-to-earth mentality of the craftsmen, their excessive desire to accumulate wealth, even at the cost of their lives. Moreover, they were reluctant to devote themselves to strictly spiritual matters (Komenský, 1978: 298). The alchemical art appears in *The Labyrinth of the World* as particularly dangerous to health. Dealing with it often caused all sorts of ailments and disease, including eyesight damage and poisoning from fumes or smoke.

The condition of the scholars also seemed to the pilgrim to be full of unpleasantness and disease. The library in the work appears first as a kind of

pharmacy for the wounds of the mind, but on closer inspection, it becomes a source of suffering. Comenius creates an image of the (literal) consumption of books by scholars who, however, knew no measure in consuming or reading them (Komenský, 1978: 300-301; Jastrzębski, 2021: 174). The book thus becomes synonymous with illness, madness, and loss of senses. In other words, excessive and ill-organised mental work leads to cachexia.

Looking at other states and professions, including lawyers, scholars, the devout, and those in power, each of which contained some sort of defect, pilgrim paid closer attention to the state of the soldier. He noted that it was a supremely dangerous occupation, but also humiliating and degrading to the man. The soldier appears as a mercenary who risks life and health (disability) for the whim of war-hungry lords and rulers (Komenský, 1978: 336).

Undoubtedly, at the centre of attention in *The Labyrinth of the World* is the question of happiness, which appears to people mostly as the desire for possession and power. It is embodied in the work in the image of Fortune and her castle, where famous and wealthy people are housed on different floors. However, a closer look at the way the rich exist reveals that they are prisoners of their wealth. Comenius paints a picture of sickly idlers, characterised by unnaturally large heads and swollen bellies (like the characters in Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*). Their distended bodies are extremely sensitive to cold or pain.

Comenius also presents in the work an image of binge eaters, who appear in caricatured poses of gourmets and drunkards, boasting of their vain lifestyle. The reverse of the pleasure of eating and drinking in the piece becomes numerous ailments and illnesses, such as vomiting or stomach pains, but also difficulties sleeping. They had a lot of trouble moving (shaking and tearing) and suffered from gout as a result of metabolic problems (Komenský, 1978: 345). Pilgrim notes that the condition of the wealthy is subject to numerous sufferings and, most significantly, material status does not protect them from death. Moreover, they perish in the midst of their wealth, being exposed to revenge or jealousy.

The climax of the work is the hero's visit to the palace of Wisdom. There he gains, so to speak, the pinnacle of secular knowledge of the world. He gets a glimpse of the perverse nature of the ruler, who (unmasked by Solomon) secretly takes revenge on him by deceiving him and bringing about his downfall. The Jewish king is punished for showing the true face of secular Wisdom, who appears in the work as the opposite of beauty, goodness and,

above all, health. Behind the mask of splendour and apparent beauty, she appears as a pale persona with a swollen face and remnants of makeup. Her hands were streaked with pimples, her body was disgusting, and her breath was unbearably foul-smelling (Komenský, 1978: 362).

The pilgrim, seeing Solomon's humiliating defeat, longs to escape from a world that seems hostile and repulsive to him. Disgust takes on the character of a somatic ailment in him. The pilgrim feels a searing pain throughout his body and severe nausea (Komenský, 1978: 366). There is a turning point in the life of the protagonist. It is a particular moment of tension and prayer, reminiscent of the conversion of St Augustine known from his *Confessions*. Like the Bishop of Hippo, the protagonist hears the voice of God and begins a migration into the depths of his heart. There he finds Christ himself, who brings about his spiritual transformation (Komenský, 1978: 368, 373). From now on, the pilgrim is able to observe anew the reality that was previously covered by the veil of the senses.

In the invisible church, the pilgrim finds peace and security. From this perspective, the temporal world appears as full of oppression, deprivation, and enslavement, while the spiritual world appears as its opposite. Reality ultimately appears to the pilgrim in stark oppositions of good and evil, truth and falsehood, affluence and poverty, order and disorder.

The pilgrim admires the spiritual beauty of the Christians, who appear to him to be both learnt and humble at the same time. He was impressed by the Christians' attitude to passing and death (Komenský, 1978: 393-394). They did not fear leaving this world, but they looked forward to it with joy. It was a moment full of joy for them as pain, suffering and fear disappeared then.

Speaking of the opposition between health and illness, it is important to emphasise that this issue is played out not only on a spiritual level in Comenius. For the protagonist of *The Labyrinth of the World*, the point of reference is Christ himself, who, as Scripture says, is the true divine healer. Obviously, Comenius thus joins the rich and multifaceted current of Baroque literature (the topos of Christ the divine physician), which locates in the Saviour the hope of inner healing (Borkowski, 2011: 175). In Comenius' case, however, it is worth emphasising that he also emphasises the care of the physical condition, i.e. a kind of physical hygiene, which is an attitude for man's spiritual growth.

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