

The Soul in the  
Axiosphere from  
an Intercultural  
Perspective,  
Volume Two



# The Soul in the Axiosphere from an Intercultural Perspective, Volume Two

Edited by

Joanna Jurewicz, Ewa Maślowska  
and Dorota Pazio-Wlazłowska

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## INTRODUCTION

In the second volume of the *Axiosphere of the Soul in Intercultural Perspective*, the reader will find the continuation of the debate on the soul and associated values. The articles included in this volume are focused on the following topics: artistic language and spiritual values of Christianity, and the Orient and Ancient Egypt. The texts are presented in the following parts:

- 4) *The soul in the artistic axiosphere: literature and art*
- 5) *The soul/spirituality from the perspective of Christian religiosity*
- 6) *The soul/spirituality in the cultures of the Orient and Ancient Egypt*

The fourth part of the monograph, devoted to artistic assessments of the soul, contains two literary analyses and one chapter devoted to art. Different ways of coding meanings introduce a completely new perspective on the way of valorizing the soul itself, as well as values related to it. The fairy-tale reality created by the representatives of German Romanticism (Adelbert von Chamisso and Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué) is introduced in the article by Andrey Kotin, who analyzes two different situations of a man's losing his soul: selling it or having it taken over by a demonic being, and raises a question of an axiological nature – What exactly does the soul mean? – in each of these cases. Another aspect of “losing the soul”, namely through death, is tracked by Igor Borkowski through the analysis of thanatic literature for children. The closing chapter on the artistic images of the soul, by art historian Beata Purc-Stepniak, guides the reader through the meanders of symbolism (node, ring) presenting the soul as a woman wedded to God in the image of *The Last Judgment* by Memling, taking into account the broad cultural context that links antiquity with the Christian world.

An essay about the soul of the bride and about the binding rules regarding the way of presenting it forms an ideological bridge with the chapters included in the fifth part, devoted to the soul and spirituality from the perspective of Christian religiosity. Reflections on this aspect of the phenomenon of the soul open with two chapters based on mystical relations: the *Message of Jesus* passed to the world by Sister Josefa Menéndez from the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is treated in the article by Irena Mytnik and the works of the great baroque mystics Stefan



of St. Teresa (Stefan Kucharski) and Bonawentura of St. Stanisław (Stanisław Frezer) in the article of Beata Łukarska. We also have here ideological considerations: the anthropological interpretation of the soul included in the writings of Martin Luther, with reference to the concepts of Bernard Clairvaux and St. Augustine, is discussed by Beata Kubok and the analysis of conceptual metaphors in the Old Testament Hebrew Canon leads Ivana Procházková to a thesis about the priority of the Law written in the soul and its somatic substitutes like heart, blood, and the bodily interior over the Law written on the stone tablets.

The sixth part takes the reader to the world of the spiritual values of the Orient and Ancient Egypt. The chapters included in this section deal with the problems of the soul from different points of view: Joanna Jurewicz writes about the ethical responsibility of the individual soul in early Hinduism according to the philosophical chapters of the *Mahabharata*, where the soul as a part of the Absolute is dependent on the actions of its bearer, Sylwia Surdykowska-Konieczny discusses sadness and longing as the main factors shaping the soul of the Iranians, Beata Abdallah-Krzepkowska reconstructs the conceptualization of the soul in the Koran, then expands the analysis beyond the Koran into Arabic poetry of the Muslim era, which is of great importance for cultural research, and Joanna Popielska-Grzybowska presents the image of the Egyptian soul in the Pyramid Texts, the oldest religious texts of the world.

We give to readers these two volumes containing a broad spectrum of evaluations of the soul, recorded in the collective memory of peoples from different parts of the world. A rich collection of original contributions, it will afford the viewer a wider perspective on the concept of the soul in the cultures and languages both European (mainly Slavic) and Oriental, in their general, regional and local varieties, in artistic, philosophical and journalistic texts, religious and colloquial statements, collected as a result of surveys or from Internet portals and discussion forums. We realize that the works included in these two volumes will not answer all questions, nevertheless, we express the hope that they will be an inspiration for researchers from various disciplines: anthropologists of culture, ethnolinguists, ethnologists, folklorists, linguists, art historians, cultural experts, ethnic studies scholars, religious scholars and other representatives of the humanities.

On behalf of the authors,  
Ewa Masłowska



## **PART IV:**

### **THE SOUL IN THE ARTISTIC AXIOSPHERE**

## CHAPTER 29

# REPRESENTATIONS OF THE SOUL IN MODERN THANATIC LITERATURE FOR YOUNG READERS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANT ADULTS

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The thematic concerns of children's literature which deliberately employs motifs of death and dying are in and by themselves a compelling field of scholarly inquiry. Such literature is a site of multiple, interrelated challenges. For one, the authors have no formal means of firmly ascertaining the level of sensitivity, emotionality, reading competence and/or cognitive capacities of their readers; at the same time, they would be hard-pressed to define their ideal implied reader as explicating such a reader's features would in all likelihood pose a major difficulty. To make the matters even more complicated, such literature can hardly be expected to respond straightforwardly to the interests of pre-adolescent readers, who are not yet capable of abstract thinking or are only starting to develop abstract thinking capacities to be honed into effectiveness at later developmental stages. Additionally, because of the strong taboo on thanatic themes, adult readers of the texts discussed below, including parents and other significant adults, form a biographically, experientially and emotionally complex and peculiar group.

The market of publications on death and dying for a young readership has been thoroughly studied and described (Borkowski 2016). In this paper, I propose to divide the body of such publications into two categories. One of them is object-defined and includes texts (mostly representing the self-help book variety) which intentionally target parents and other significant adults and address the issues of death and dying, death education, educational and social impacts and psychological support. The other, subject-defined category comprises modern, recently published, originally Polish and translated literary works for young readers. Two serious limitations to my argument are that, firstly, the literary texts I

studied were randomly sampled,<sup>1</sup> and, secondly, all texts with explicit religious underpinnings were deliberately excluded from the sample.<sup>2</sup> Such a selection of resources for my analysis was dictated by the availability of publications, also from the perspective of potential users (i.e. parents and other significant adults who use such literature to assist young readers in their first literary and biographical experiences). In terms of doctrinal allegiances, another motive was to study the segment of publications which are chosen and selected primarily for the reading experience they offer and, secondarily, for the relevance of their focal themes, rather than for any creed-related reasons (which override the circumstances of reading and/or biographical motivations). In other words, the motifs of death and dying as such, rather than the Christian eschatology, serve here as the primary criterion of the reading choice. These variables must be looked into in conjunction with civilisational and cultural differences (which have been quite well studied based on public opinion surveys in several countries), as well as with the findings reported in regular studies carried out by social psychologists and thanatologists. In this respect, Polish society has been comparatively researched against the backdrop of other European and US societies by, for example, Wiesław Łukaszewski, whose detailed analyses imply a high and, at the same time, constant incidence in Poland of beliefs and convictions about the afterlife, eternal felicity and the permanent persistence of the soul after the death of the body (2010, 44–51). At any rate, such a portrayal of our cultural conjuncture is quite commonly known, as suggested, for example, by the remarks of Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt (2011, 5–9).

Prior research amply ascertains that literature featuring motifs of death and dying tends to be read in quite particular circumstances (Borkowski 2017). As a rule, the decision to use such texts is made when readings of this kind can serve as didactic tools for explaining to children what has already happened (the circumstances, phenomenon and irreversibility of death) and for assuaging their pain after the loss of a loved one. Alternatively, such readings are chosen as a result of a sequential process in which parents or other significant adults realise and come to accept the fact of somebody's illness; this inspires them to aid children who expect

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<sup>1</sup> The texts were selected by browsing based on thematic categories (dying, terminal disease, old age, death, passing, mourning, quietus) and on key terms, such as therapeutic tales, bibliotherapy and death education.

<sup>2</sup> I excluded texts released by publishers affiliated with churches and religious organisations, texts authored by the clergy and doctrinally-informed texts that referred to a defined theological system.

an explanation of the events at hand by offering them a suitable reading. Or adults resolve to avail themselves of a book when they recognise their own communicative helplessness on the one hand and the pressure of the moment on the other. Such a realisation is also likely to encourage adults to consult self-help literature in search of the knowledge they need. I mention these motivations for a reason; namely, they are all reflected both in the activities and in the declarations of parents and other significant adults, who cite and describe them as essentially relevant to their selection of readings. For, emphatically, such readings are usually treated as interventional measures rather than as a pre-planned element of educational strategies to be discussed in order to introduce young readers to the issues of death and dying. Instead, such literature is resorted to when external events make it necessary to explain what has happened with and to people (or, sometimes, animals) to whom children were emotionally attached. Sometimes such literature is also used to clarify to children the responses and reactions of adults—their parents, other significant adults and/or third parties—who go through depression, anxiety and an emotional turmoil after losing their loved one. In such cases, suitable readings are supposed to elucidate and justify the states experienced by such adults of the children's acquaintance.

Research suggests that postponing conversations about death usually follows a few conventional scenarios: waiting until children are older; not addressing death at all because it is not a fit theme for children; and talking about death when and only when it becomes absolutely necessary (i.e. when a loved one dies) (Czudek-Ślęczka 2012a, 500–1). A useful inventory of conventional half-truths and myths about how children understand death and dying, as well as of interpretations of behaviours and responses regarded as adequate by children's significant adults, was put together some time ago by Manu Keirse (2005, 22–27).

I dwell on these circumstances of reading because they essentially affect plot construction, the selection of characters and the events they experience in the text. The settings and timing of reading, as described above, indicate that such narratives will be predominantly focused on overcoming the dread of transience and the inevitability (and the irreversibility) of death as well as on explaining the causes of death as objective, independent of and not attributable to the child.<sup>3</sup> Such a

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<sup>3</sup> As children often tend to blame themselves for the death of the person to whom they were emotionally attached, this is one of the foremost concerns in perceiving and understanding the passing of a parent, another significant adult or a loved one (Dodziuk: 2009: 176-179).

specifically and narrowly focused employment of literature about death and dying influences, as I believe, not only its status on the market but also, above all perhaps, the deliberate design of such texts. Cover blurbs often indicate that the content of the book is adjusted to the presupposed reading circumstances and expectations and ensure that the plot was deliberately devised based on the definition of the problem to be solved through reading. This, I think, is true not only about therapeutic tales, which are directly informed by and aligned with such assumptions. As a consequence of their status, such books usually address issues which count among the most frequent sources of doubts and/or emotional trauma for a young readership while the handling of these themes is devised to make the mysteries of mortality as comprehensible as possible. Polish studies indicate that the school setting does not change much in this respect since teachers, as a rule, insist that they have no methodological competence to discuss death and dying with their students (Czudek-Słęczka 2012b, 479–496).

The insights above help understand why the texts for very young readers I discuss here relatively seldom include representations of the afterlife, the continuity and changeability of the individual's status after death and the human spiritual condition in the hereafter.<sup>4</sup> The authors usually focus on the issues related to the multitude of a question concerning the very process of dying and the fact of death itself, and their narrative reflection only rarely ventures beyond the threshold of death or casts a glimpse behind the curtain of the otherworld. Importantly, stories and tales rooted in culture are a communication channel which helps communicate difficult truths in ways that appease fears and explain the ways of the world. "Fairy-tale scholars are in agreement that fairy tales are a highly helpful method of working with children if we want to communicate a difficult thing to them, especially if it concerns the themes which are challenging to talk about also in the world of adults" (Fopka-Kowalczyk 2017, 77).

Of course, the reasons for this are to be found in the incremental processes of growing up and, then, maturation, in which young readers acquire cognitive competencies and develop abstract thinking capacities, which condition talking about the afterlife in general and about the substantively conceived soul in particular. The correlations between

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<sup>4</sup> Only six out of the twenty books for very young readers included in the study clearly address these themes.

developmental stages and the phases of death anxiety are illuminatingly explained by Joanna Mesjasz:

In very young children, the fear of death results most often from the fear of separation (...). Children aged 3-5 treat death as a parting and believe that the deceased person lives on, but somewhere else, for example at the churchyard (...). From the age of six, children start to distinguish death from sleep, yet they still do not comprehend the fundamental attributes of death, especially its irreversibility (...). Around the age of eight, children develop clearer notions relative to death; they understand the irreversibility and physiological aspects of death and tend to treat death as a biological phenomenon. (...). Children aged 9-10 perceive the inevitability, irreversibility and biologism of death, but cannot yet handle the spiritual and psychological aspects of death. At this age, the fear of death increases although it is not linked to the complete comprehension of death (...). Parental knowledge about and attitudes to death are key factors in building cognitive representations of death in children. (2010, 113–114)

Interestingly, the preoccupation with the biological and physical facets of death and dying in literature is also influenced by other factors. These factors include the cultural provenance of the analysed texts and their employment of expedient and communicatively effective metaphors in which death and dying are associated with animate nature (both fauna and flora), however without underlining the seasonal cyclicality, where nature is reborn in spring after the autumnal fading and the wintry stagnation. Another important factor can be found in the tendency to avoid kindling hopes for a quick encounter with the deceased person, suggesting his/her physical closeness, intimating the proximity of the world of the living and the realm of the dead as well as increasing the risk of imagining, confabulating or narrativising representations, which could assume palpably material shapes for young readers. The authors as a rule (though not without exception) seek to make their tales rational even if they extensively rely on metaphors. Only very few writers do not shun answering the apparently elementary question with which the readers are engrossed—i.e. where the dead person is now—and, first of all, constructing the plot in ways that make room for questions about the dwelling place, the material status and the ontological certitude of the deceased individual.<sup>5</sup> For very young children up to four years of age,

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<sup>5</sup> In his book *Smutek Dziecka. Jak Pomóc Dziecku Przeżyć Stratę i Żalobę?* (the original title: *Kinderen Helpen bij Verlies. Een Boek voor Al wie van Kinderen Houdt/Helping Children to Cope with Loss: A Book for Everybody who Loves*



death is a reversible condition: it happens for a while and can be reverted at any moment. Scholars sometimes specify that an interest in the afterlife arises at around the age of nine (Fopka-Kowalczyk 2017, 57–58).

The previous paragraph is neither a review nor a critique of the writers' tools and methods; rather, it presents an outline of prevalent tendencies in literature for very young readers.

However, some of the literary texts I examine in this paper do not evade exploring the hereafter and fashioning representations of the soul. In a therapeutic tale which is supposed to answer the question what happens after the death of a kitten whose dead body a child comes across while having a walk with its mother, the writer switches to the fable convention (a vet commences the fable and suggests that it should be completed by the child-protagonist): "and so the kitten wanted very much to walk high up in the clouds. A long time ago later [sic!], the kitten got some magical syrup from his mom and obtained a superpower. From then on, he could always spend his time as high up as he wanted. Up there in the clouds. And suddenly he was no longer dead and was always very cheerful" (Fopka-Kowalczyk 2017, 147). Similarly to self-help books, the dialogues which describe the state of the dead person and the place where s/he dwells tend to omit any substantial or ontological changes that could take place between the moment of death and arrival in the afterworld: "At the grave of his brother, Thomas (3.9) asks his mother who is watering the flowers: 'Is Pete thirsty?' His mother explains: 'Pete isn't thirsty. Pete doesn't feel thirst anymore. The flowers are thirsty. We buried Pete in the earth, and now he is with God'" (Leist 2009, 15). The same truth is sensitively explained by the writer of a story in which a mother talks to her toddler son after they have returned from his father's funeral: "'I believe Daddy is in heaven,' says Mother. 'No, Daddy is in the coffin,' replies Olav. 'Yes, his body is in the coffin. But what was inside him, what made him nice and lively Daddy is in heaven, I believe'" (Kommedal 2008, 35).

Representations of the soul which do appear in these texts are highly inspiring examples of the effects produced by grappling with the inexpressible. Although these representations are usually conveyed in conventional, familiar and traditional forms, they can pose a considerable interpretive challenge when they are part of readings for young children (to repeat, readings uninformed by any direct religious agenda). In these

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*Children*) (Keirse 2015), Manu Keirse lists several consequences of adults' ad-hoc fabrication of stories about what happens to people when they die. Many additional examples thereof are to be found in other psychological and thanatological publications.

texts, it is the soul that lies at the foundation of the belief in life after death, and it is the soul that forms the element of human nature (or, sometimes, the nature of other anthropomorphised characters) which reaches out towards eternity. One text offers a nearly textbook-like, methodical account of what the soul is, what value it has and how its existence develops processually:

You don't go to heaven just like that. First, you have to die, and when you die, you go there as a whole. Dad was buried in the earth. Mom has said that only the body is put in the grave and explained that the body is what you can touch with your hand. But the soul is what is most important in the human being—Mom said that—and the soul isn't put in the grave at all. You can't touch the soul with your hand. I think that Dad is the soul now. (Jalonen 2008, 30)

A similar distinction into the body and the soul is presented in Constanze Köpp's first-person narrative:

My soul won't fall apart. I'm not sad. I don't feel like crying. Here, in heaven, I feel that nothing really comes to an end. The earthly body decomposes and falls apart, but the soul can't fall apart (...) The soul goes on existing, while the body doesn't. The beauty of the body passes, unlike the beauty of the heart and the soul. The body gets old, while the soul grows mature and wise. (2010, 58)

Interestingly, the device used by Köpp appears in a nearly identical form in Schmitt, when at the end of the story of Oscar and the Lady in Pink, the impending death is heralded by an abrupt, visible ageing/maturing of the boy-protagonist—or rather of his self (soul) —who turns into a centenarian (2011, 82–85).

Composing texts on thanatic themes is a challenge which breeds multiple doubts and hesitations as well as provokes questions. On the verge of religiously inspired writings, we come across authorial statements, such as: “How should I imagine the people I lost? As experiencing hell? The soul is energy, and energy can't die” (Köpp 2010, 7).

In the texts I address here, the soul does not have a personal, substantive status of an individual's representation after death; neither is it merely a component of the living human being or a distinctive feature of the conscious human self that sets it apart from the material and animate world which is substantially devoid of this property. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, who relates several conversations about death and dying with children, cites extensively their oral and/or written expressions (e.g. poetry, literary miniatures and letters). In the case of teenagers, such utterances very often

demonstrate the consequences of treating the “self” as that which is the human being (soul) who inhabits the body. A vivid example is provided by the last will of a fifteen-year-old girl who addresses her mother, saying that after death she is going to be happy in heaven, and then gives instructions concerning funeral clothes for her body which will remain on earth (Kübler-Ross 1997, 138–143). In a therapeutic tale by Monika Zawistowska, the mother explains death to the protagonist in the following way: “Grandma doesn’t speak to us because she’s fallen asleep forever,” she said in a voice which was breaking like thin twigs. “She is asleep never to wake up again. She left us because she was very ill. God took her to be with him so that she isn’t in pain and doesn’t suffer any longer” (2015, 12). This frequent device involving the imagery of the soul’s happiness and, as such, its immanent features and functions is also used by Hilde Ringen Kommedal: “I don’t think that Daddy is crying now. He may be sad because he isn’t with us, but he’s no longer ill or in pain,” says the mother” (2008, 30). In the passage, “Daddy” is identified with his posthumous being, which evokes not so much his physical figure as his spiritual emanation. Notably, Kommedal is consistent in employing conjectural wordings, with the mother-character repeatedly using verbs such as “think” and “believe,” which deny any conclusiveness to her message and add indeterminacy to her dialogues with her young son. Polish writer Emilia Litwinko offers far more univocal judgments, yet her rendering of the soul, its separation from the body after death and persistence in the afterlife is equally vague. A conversation between an old lady and a toddler whose grandmother died before he had time to say goodbye to her provides a moral: “‘Don’t say farewell,’ the old lady says smilingly. ‘Say, see you! Remember, death doesn’t exist... We only think it does. Your grandma lives on in heaven and is waiting for you there. Like my mother. Someday, we’ll join them, shan’t we?’” (Litwinko 2014, 78).

Very educational but also rather extraordinary representations of the soul can be found in *The Death Book*, a picture book by Pernilla Stalfelt.<sup>6</sup> Very short texts accompany more or less playful illustrations which steer clear of aestheticisation and deliberately embrace ugliness. When explaining what happens to people after death, Stalfelt writes: “You must be wondering where you go when you die. Nobody knows for sure, only those who are already dead. Many people think that the soul goes to God.”

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<sup>6</sup> The series of books authored by Stalfelt, which are published in Poland with the marketing catchphrase “taboo-breaking,” is known to stir considerable controversy over both its content and its graphic design. Her works are often criticised for their explicit and excessively rough rendering of her focal themes.

The corresponding drawing shows a person lying flat on their back while the soul, whose dotted contour emulates the contour of the stretched-out body, is floating up from their chest; the body and the soul are marked and captioned accordingly: □ body □ soul, with the soul trying to greet the mourners, who cannot see it. The text goes on to explain that there are people who believe that the soul is invisible and that, on leaving the body, it flies up to heaven, which is situated somewhere out there in space (Stalfelt 2003, 6-8). Additionally, Stalfelt also writes about the transformation of the dead person into a frightful skeleton, a werewolf or a ghost that scares people at night.

Therapists insist that one's religious views and beliefs should not be hidden or suppressed when the afterlife and its visions are discussed: "If you are a believer, you can say that the person's body is in the grave while their soul has gone to meet God," as explained in a commentary to a therapeutic tale (Fopka-Kowalczyk 2017, 159–163).

Texts for a very young readership must avoid such presentations of the soul because they are originally associated with the therapeutic intervention of removing or relieving trauma. A liminal tale about the soul as a medium mediating between this world and the otherworld would hardly be possible without reflections on the irreversibility of death, without attention to the one-directional nature of dying and without questions about where the dead actually are now, all this in the situation when abstract thinking is not developed. Yet there is an example that proves this assumption wrong. At the highest level of abstraction we would be likely to come across the attitude espoused by Gabriel Looser, who in a way glorifies the moment of dying:

Our question is: "Where does the soul go?" The first answer is: it goes back to itself. It means that when we leave our bodies, we obtain a deep insight into the concealed dimension of our souls—the spark of God in us. It is the insight we seem to lack time to develop amidst the hustle and bustle of everyday chores, concerns and duties. Our incessant exertions focused on material things (...) leave us hardly any room to attend to the last things. And this is what lies at the core of dying! (2015, 248)

This tempered version of the tale of the soul is at least partly linked to the widespread tendency to add a gory quality to the modern space and narratives in the media, film, music and fine arts. They are all quick to rely on the trappings of disguises, imitations of ghosts and the paraphernalia of the afterlife inhabited by the unknown and impenetrable creatures and powers. Of course, they have been scattered across nearly all levels of culture, but it is here that the pressure increases on the text to provide

relief rather than open the wounds, to assuage the pain of loss rather than multiple questions and exacerbate emotions. As aptly put by Widera-Wysoczańska:

The development of intellect and sensitivity in children should be managed with great caution and delicacy. Without a doubt, the first image of death etched in the child's mind will largely determine the child's fear of the problems and inevitability of death. The error adults tend to make is that children find out about death through the images of accidents, disasters, crimes and atrocities. It is a mistake to create the atmosphere of constant intimidation through leaving things unsaid—the concealment that ensues from such handling of the death issue. (1990, 593)

Thanatological debates fuelled by hospice movement activists and publicly recognisable champions of humanistic medicine and psychology repeatedly tackle the controversies around talking with children not so much about life and death as about the dual nature of the human being as composed of the body and the soul. In the 1970s, parents were as a rule warmly encouraged to “talk with children about ‘the difference between the self that thinks and loves’ and the body which ‘the self inhabits.’” Marielene Leist, who argued that this approach confused children, considered the perception of death as the separation of the soul from the body to be anachronistic (2009, 228–229). Kübler-Ross took an entirely different position on the issue. Drawing on her long experience of accompanying the dying (therein dying children and children who witnessed the dying of adults), she concluded that children had their own internalised knowledge of death. She provided dialogues with the dying person as models: “‘But, naturally, you know my frail old body is not going to last much longer. But I guess it keeps going while you need me here. Soon we will be together and, guess what? I will be able to see and hear, and we will dance together’” (a conversation between Granny and her terminally ill great-granddaughter) (Kübler-Ross 1997, 128). In reconciling with the prospect of death and its experience, the concept of the soul as a being that “lives on” is usually left vague and understated. Such a strategy is used by, for example, Maria Molicka in her tale entitled *Lustro (The Mirror)*, which is regarded as a useful therapeutic text and a helpful didactic tool in school settings (Popaszkievicz 2009, 266–268). Molicka tells the story of a terminally ill girl who spends long hours in her bed. One day, when she gazes into the mirror, she sees not only her own reflection but also other girls who invite her to play with them in the interesting, safe and good world across the looking glass. The image is rather conventionalised and does not name directly the transformation that

must take place for the girl to go through the mirror. The protagonist first crosses the barrier, slowly gets accustomed to living “over there” and goes back to the realm of the living. Finally, on the other side of the mirror, she meets her grandmother, who having greeted her joyously asks: “Are you... are you going to go back there?” and “anxiously waits for the answer” (Molicka 1999, 192).

The texts I discuss in this paper do not belong to the movement within children’s literature that embraces the pedagogy of fear. Hence, other problems concerning the soul arise since, isolated from the biological body which remains in the material domain, the soul would be doomed to solitude, to wandering in the netherworld and perhaps also to suffering or craving to return to the child and/or the child’s living loved ones.

In *Dziewczynka i drzewo kawek* (original title: *Tyttö ja Naakkapuu/The Girl and the Jackdaw Tree*), the theme of the dead father and his dwelling place is introduced as a fact: “Dad is in heaven, even though a while ago I thought I saw him in the house across the street (...). Dad is in heaven, and he sees me. Does Dad feel what I feel?” (Jalonen 2008, 14, 22). Though peculiar in the context of literary communication, the realistic presentation of death and dying in literature for a young readership (of the kind discussed in this text) makes it difficult, if not entirely impossible, for writers to venture into the territory specific to the eschatological explorations of the afterlife.

There is another important reason why writing for young children about the soul is a serious challenge. The authors of the publications I examine here produce their tales either as therapeutic texts (primarily intended or recommended for bibliotherapeutic uses) or as serious literary texts in which narratives are understated and the emotional overtones of the events conveyed with considerable caution. Because the texts have an educational function ascribed to them, they avoid infantilisation.<sup>7</sup> As death—a “serious” matter—is approached only “seriously,” the authors avoid raising unmotivated or rationally unverifiable hopes and, in doing so, do not embark on speculating about what might be if at all. The rationalising narrative involves Köpp’s teenage protagonist: “Suddenly, there is bright light as if a hundred lightnings have struck. This happens probably to cover the soul which sneaks out of the body. My soul and my body were inseparable for fifteen years. Only death could separate them” (2010, 57). The passage dwells both on the duality of human nature and on

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<sup>7</sup> The educational value of the texts is usually advertised in cover blurbs and/or editorial notes posted at the websites of the publishers and internet bookshops.

the soul's power to enliven the body as well as on the indivisibility of the body and the soul until death. It is death that has the power to split the body from the soul, which differs from the powers conventionally attributed to death.

Nevertheless, the authors of the texts addressed here are understandably pressured by their own emotionality and empathetic approach to the expectations of potential readers to answer or suggest an answer to the question what happens after death, where those who are dead find themselves, what they are like and who they are. This is usually why thanatic texts for young children refer to the afterlife in which the body (and the soul) exists into eternity. This is also a relevant aspect to be taken into account when exploring the image of the soul as crafted in children's literature in dimensions, contexts and imagery with which adults are familiar and which are consistent with popular culture in its aestheticising variety that avoids both the gore style and the pornographisation and scandalisation of death. Due to this deliberate strategy, the texts I explore here are fairly popular with therapists, parents and other significant adults who, while looking for tools to be used in working with children, eagerly use texts by Polish authors and translations which, as already mentioned, tend to be not so much factual as perhaps rather prophetic in the Polish cultural realities.

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## Summary

Children's literature about death and dying is a compelling field of scholarly inquiry. Such literature responds to the interests and concerns of pre-adolescent readers, who either do not think in abstract terms yet or only begin to develop abstract thinking capacities to be honed into effectiveness at later developmental stages. Because of the strong taboo on thanatic themes, adult readers of such texts, including parents and other significant adults, also form a biographically, experientially and emotionally complex and peculiar group. This paper explores representations of the soul in texts that primarily target young children—and, indirectly, adults as well—as implied readers.

**Keywords:** thanatology, soul, literature for children and young adults

## CHAPTER 30

### THE SOUL IN THE AXIOSPHERE FROM INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVES – *PETER SCHLEMIHL'S MIRACULOUS STORY* BY ADELBERT VON CHAMISSO, AND *UNDINE* BY FRIEDRICH DE LA MOTTE FOUQUÉ

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#### **30.1. Soul vs. psyche – The Concept of the soul in German Romanticism**

Before proceeding to an analysis of the motif of the loss or gain of a soul in two fairy tales from the period of German Romanticism, it would be appropriate to make a preliminary remark which seems quite pertinent in this context. Namely, the soul, as envisioned by the Romantics – or at least in the selected texts of this study – is not a psychological phenomenon. In other words, the soul should here be thought of as the essence of a human being, rather than as one of the integral components of the human psyche or as an equivalent of the psyche. Such an approach to the category of the soul, the metaphysical and religious roots of which are clear, shows surprising consistency not only with the classical Christian concept of the “soul” (albeit significantly simplified), but also with that of the Far East. In the book *Myślenie a obserwacja (Thinking and Observation)*, the renowned Russian philosopher and Buddhologist Aleksander Piatigorsky writes that:

More or less between the 6th and 4th century BCE, Hindu thinkers had completed extensive work in the field of analysis of human psychology.

One may presume that their preliminary analysis had as its goal differentiating the *that* (in the Sanskrit, *tad*) which is the unchanging essence of a thing (*sat*), and does not undergo transformations from the larger psyche [...]; [isolating] that which in and of itself cannot be deconstructed or analyzed. [Piatigorsky 2016, 27]<sup>1</sup>

The word “soul” is invoked in a similar (albeit not identical) sense in the works of the German Romantics: this was only the more so in that the notion of an absolute, indivisible unity was one of the key axioms and departure points of Romantic philosophy. One thereby faces a fundamental tension when considering the soul and individuality. Another common trait between German Romanticism and ancient Hindu thought is the idea of a superior, trans-personal soul, to which the individual soul stands in relation to a part of the whole. One is thereby led to question the existence of individual souls, as these may be viewed as mere parts of a greater, eternal and immutable being – although it is their ontological rather than their existential status that falls into doubt. The Swiss literary historian and essayist Albert Béguin perceptively reflects in his *The Romantic Soul and Dream*:

Alongside the Neoplatonist concept of a world-mirror was born the idea of an omnipresent, universal soul, the spiritual core of everything, of which individual souls are mere emanations or manifestations. Such a soul is the source from which both spiritual reality and the cosmos emanate. [...] Nature corresponds to the unconscious activity of this spirit, which becomes conscious via the human mind and which is an inseparable unity when viewed under its creative aspect. Such a soul exists in the same relation to nature as does the artist to their work. “These are like the thoughts of God Himself, as thoughts and things are in Him. [...] Think on it yourselves and you will realize how it is” – an anonymous thinker of the Renaissance has already said. [Béguin 2011, 94]

Therefore, the soul appears in Romantic thought on the one hand as an unconscious (or rather, supra-conscious) element of the universal, yet on the other as an individuated emanation of that universal. It is interesting that the axiological valuation of the very fact of the existence or of pseudo-existence in German Romanticism has a perceptibly Gnostic

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<sup>1</sup> „Где-то в промежутке между шестым и четвертым веком до нашей эры индийские мыслители совершили огромную работу по анализу психики человека. Можно предположить, что первоначально этот анализ имел своей целью отделить в объекте рассмотрения психику от *того* (на санскрите *tad*), что есть сущее (*sat*), не подверженное трансформациям [...]; от того, что само не может быть расчленено, анализируется.”

character. Simply put, one may be led to maintain that the individual soul as such is a result of a cosmological fall, which in classical Christian theology was explained via the myth of original sin. Małgorzata Sokołowicz opines similarly, referencing Jean-Pierre Jourdan, who in his concept of the *Romantic Soul* saw "a reflection of Neoplatonist philosophy, according to which the soul departs from Unity into a plurality, and later must re-attain Unity" (Sokołowicz 2016, 51). In characterizing the Romantic view of the soul as an entity which has been separated from its cosmic source, Béguin unambiguously postulates that: "Individual existence is evil – it must have its source in some error or sin which disturbed the primaeval harmony" (Béguin 2011, 92). It is no accident that one of the greatest philosophers of German Romanticism, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, was not only probably the first European thinker to tackle the problematic category of the "I", but also came to the somewhat Buddhist conclusion that the ego is illusory, to a large degree. Whereas in Buddhism the "I" does not exist at all, in Hindu cosmology, despite appearances, a personal dimension of the absolute is actually conceded to a degree; there is, however, a supra-individual "I" which is not to be conflated with its individual variations. In the Hindu tradition, what is important is not to confound the two. The famous Vedic formula *tat tvam asi* (*you are that*) is based upon the mystical experience of the supra-personal link by the individual "I", which originated from the undifferentiated whole. Sokołowicz is correct when she writes that: "Thanks to the individual soul the Romantic is connected to nature, to the universe and, in certain interpretations, also to God" (Sokołowicz 2016, 52). What is more: the authentic life of a human being – in contrast to their illusory existence – depends on a continual awareness of this unbreakable, maternal bond. To visualize this interesting paradox, Béguin cites Franz Baader, who maintains that "each individual lives in proportion to their closeness to the All, and therefore inasmuch as ecstasy tears them away from their individuality" [Béguin 2011, 91-92]. Of course, from a psychological point of view, such "ecstasy" is simply one of the symptoms of emotional disturbance – in the textbook Freudian language it can be referred to as "hysteria". For this reason, Béguin correctly and firmly delimits the Romantic vision of the soul and human being from the psychoanalytical approach. Their aims and methods differ. Whereas the therapist seeks above all to guide the suffering patient toward a state of psychological balance, the Romantic:

[...] [is] indifferent to this idea of health, and rather searches for images, even pathological ones, which open paths to unknown spheres of the soul [...] to find there the secret of everything which in time and space means a

continuity beyond the Self [...] This distinction, which differentiates the psychoanalyst equally from the mystic and from the Romantic, presents a block to their understanding anything which they would merely write off as psychosis. [Béguin 2011, 16].

It is worth indicating that this Romantic journey into the depths of “unknown spheres of the soul” differs from the therapy of the “shrink” in its classical sense not only due to the lack of any motivation to heal. Observing such nuances is important. There is more at play than merely probing one’s depths to come to know one’s proverbial “dark side” – although, in the works of certain Romantics, especially E.T.A. Hoffmann, such a practice is clearly observable. The early Romantics (Ludwig Tieck, Novalis) did not so much flirt with the theme of evil; they simply fundamentally over-valorized a form of symbolism which was already generally accepted. The concept of “night” for Novalis ensuinely becomes a metaphor for a higher, supra-material reality, serving as a locus of a mediated experience between the soul longing for truth and eternal life and God. The tacit presumption is that it is the light of day which keeps the human being tied to earthly worries and pleasures. In the later period of German Romanticism, however, both the style and semantics of texts which oscillate around the problem of the soul and the loss thereof undergo an essential change. We will now proceed to examine such a multi-layered metamorphosis in the soul-concept by examining two fairy tales which are both among the most articulate and commonly-read.

### **30.2. The Soul and shadow in *Peter Schlemihl’s Miraculous Story* by Adelbert von Chamisso**

*Peter Schlemihl’s Miraculous Story* – the most famous work of Adelbert von Chamisso (1781-1838), who was exiled from his French homeland as a result of events after the French Revolution – became a bestseller shortly after its publication, and it today remains part of the canon of 19<sup>th</sup>-century German literature. It was rapidly translated into every European language, and its protagonist achieved legendary status. As such, a popular poem (more rightly, a popular ballad) which appeared in the wake of the tale’s popularity is quite interesting. In a carefree, somewhat songlike manner, the ballad summarizes Chamisso’s tale (with more than a bit of metrical imperfection) and adds indispensable morale. The catch, however, is that this adaptation is quite dubious, as neither the content nor the ultimate message match that conveyed by Chamisso’s original. There are, obviously, superficial similarities. The hero of this short, naive poem sells his shadow to a mysterious stranger, as does his literary doppelganger. Yet

at this point the similarity to the original ends. In the popular version, Schlemihl realizes that by giving up his shadow he has also lost his soul, with temporal perdition and eternal damnation ensuing. Chamisso's tale is quite at odds with this more conventional symbolism<sup>2</sup>. One may begin by mentioning the most salient aspects of Chamisso's tale, as regards genre and plot:

- 1) Contrary to most popular fairy tales, the action takes place in contemporary times (at least for the original author and first readers), and the only fantastic elements are the magic tricks performed by a man in a grey frock coat (Chamisso 61, 16), the seven-league boots and (obviously) the fact of one's being able to sell one's shadow;
- 2) Broadly defined, the protagonist belongs to the petty bourgeoisie, and is rather more impecunious than wealthy. This lends the events a social dimension;
- 3) At the end of the tale, Schlemihl becomes a traveller and scientist, given over largely to his research in the fields of biology and geography.

One, therefore, is dealing with a text which is more a precursor of magical realism than it is a traditional fairy tale. Everything begins with a simple transaction. As a guest at a party held by one of his acquaintances, Thomas John, Peter Schlemihl notices a certain puzzling figure among the invitees, whose presence among the group strikes him as incongruous. He is described as "a tall, elderly man - quiet, thin and emaciated" (Chamisso 61, 14) and as "humble and confused" (Chamisso 61, 18). Despite his paltry appearance, this stranger quickly attracts the protagonist's attention through the various magic tricks he performs which defy rational explanation. He places his hand into the pocket of his old-fashioned frock coat and pulls out all manner of things – both possible and impossible. Beginning with a pair of binoculars which had been lost by a lady, he concludes with three beautiful horses, a woven rug and a broad tent (Chamisso 61, 17–18). Finally, he addresses the protagonist with a proposition both ridiculous and tempting: "for this short time that I have had the pleasure of finding myself in your presence, sir, I have been able to repeatedly [...] with genuinely indescribable delight [...] observe the

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<sup>2</sup> With regards to the discrepancy between the ballad mentioned and the book, one should emphasize that in the original, Schlemihl's shadow *is neither* a metaphor *nor* a symbol of his soul, because selling his soul is later the bargain offered to regain his shadow.