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***Bezoar z łez ludzkich czasu powietrza
morowego* by Walenty Bartoszewski
as an Example of “A Prescription for the Soul
and the Body” at the Time of the Plague¹**

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Abstract: The article is an attempt to interpret a hardly known collection of poems by Walenty Bartoszewski, a Jesuit in Vilnius, published in reaction to the outbreak of the plague in Vilnius in the years 1629–1632, which constitutes the testimony of increased religiousness in the face of an epidemic. In the article, the author of the collection is presented, as well as his poetic oeuvre. Also, a brief description of the social background of those events is given. Then, other texts from the 16th–18th centuries, concerned with the topic of the epidemic are characterized. They include sermons, secular works, religious songs and prayers. The main part of the article is devoted to the interpretation of the collection by Bartoszewski in the context of the most important aspects of the volume *Bezoar z łez ludzkich czasu powietrza morowego* [Bezoar of Human Tears Shed at the Time of the Plague], which include: the manifestation of religiousness at the beginning of the 18th century, the realities of the epidemic depicted in lyrics, the vision of God and Christ, ways of protecting the faithful against the plague, and the intercession of the Mother of God.

Keywords: lyric song, religious poetry, Jesuit poetry, plague, bezoar

Epidemics of infectious diseases beset the citizens of the Polish Commonwealth – in only several-year-long intervals in particular areas – almost throughout the entire period of its existence.³ Old-time physicians were unable to recognize the symptoms, so such terms as “plague,” “pestilence,” “black plague” or “bubonic plague,” as well “fever,” “chills” and “bloody

¹ All the titles of and quotations from the texts in Polish have been translated here by Piotr Cymbalista.

² The article was originally published in Polish under the author’s former name Monika Pasek.

³ See the tabular data in: A. Karpiński, *W walce z niewidzialnym wrogiem. Epidemie chorób zakaźnych w Rzeczypospolitej w XVI–XVIII wieku i ich następstwa demograficzne, społeczno-ekonomiczne i polityczne*, Warszawa: “Neriton,” Instytut Historii PAN, 2000, pp. 311–317.

flux,” were applied to denote, *inter alia*, typhus fever, smallpox, dysentery, measles, diphtheria and influenza, which often accompanied the plague.⁴ Today, it is known that the plague is an acute infectious disease caused by the *Yersinia pestis* bacillus, manifest in three forms: bubonic, pneumonic and septicaemic plague. The bacterium causes either enzootic or epizootic centres among rodents, from which it is transmitted to humans. The bacillus of the plague was discovered by Alexandre Yersin, a Swiss, and Kitasato Shibasaburō, a Japanese in 1894.⁵ It is estimated that during the largest European pandemic of the plague, called the Black Death, in the years 1348–1350, 25 million people died, i.e. from a third to half of the population,⁶ which proves how extremely infectious it was. The plague receded in Europe in the late 18th century, due to the improvement in sanitary and hygienic conditions in towns, increased immunity of the population and the partial extinction of the black rat, the main vector of the bacteria.⁷

The main 16th–18th century sources on plague outbreaks include municipal records, regional assembly constitutions, royal orders and decrees read out to the public, hospital registers, medical treatises and anti-plague guidebooks, testaments of merchants and noblemen, private diaries and memoirs (both handwritten and printed), municipal and monastic chronicles, plague sermons and prayers, morality plays and books on “dying well,” iconography, as well as high literature, such as occasional poetry and religious song collections.⁸ These works of literature are evidence of the increased piety in society decimated by raging epidemics, and of the changes in the mentality of contemporary people, motivated by the constant risk and the company of death. Those pieces may also constitute a source of knowledge on the daily reality in the areas affected by the plague, interpersonal relationships at a time of danger, contemporary knowledge of the causes of epidemics, as well as plague prevention and treatment.

One of the most popular 17th-century⁹ religious occasional works on the subject of the plague was the collection of 24 songs (one unnumbered), entitled *Bezoar z łez ludzkich czasu powietrza morowego* [Bezoar of Human Tears Shed at the Time of the Plague] by Walenty Bartoszewski, a Jesuit

⁴ Ibid., p. 5; S. Namaczyńska, *Kronika klęsk elementarnych w Polsce i w krajach sąsiednich w latach 1648–1696*, Vol. 1: *Zjawiska meteorologiczne i pomory*, Lwów–Warszawa, 1937, pp. 76, 80; J. Kracik, *Pokonać czarną śmierć. Staropolskie postawy wobec zarazy*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo M, 1991, p. 16.

⁵ *Wielki słownik medyczny*, edited by J. Komender, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Lekarskie PZWL, 1996, p. 312; J. Kracik, *Pokonać czarną śmierć...*, pp. 14–15; A. Karpiński, op. cit., pp. 22, 44.

⁶ J. Kracik, *Pokonać czarną śmierć...*, pp. 16–17; A. Karpiński, op. cit., p. 64. In 1348, 40–50 people died daily, see: A. Jelicz, *Życie codzienne w średniowiecznym Krakowie (wiek XIII–XV)*, Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1966, p. 75.

⁷ A. Karpiński, op. cit., p. 33.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 10, 282–283.

⁹ Ibid., p. 244, note 196; J.I. Kraszewski, *Wilno od początków jego do roku 1750*, Vol. 1, Vilnius 1840, p. 348.

in Vilnius, first published in Vilnius in 1624 and reissued in 1630, when the epidemic returned. On the title page, the author emphasizes that it is the edition with a supplement: a preventive-therapeutic guide entitled *Nauka przeciwko morowemu powietrzu doświadczona i od wielu sławnych doktorów spisana* [Proven Knowledge Against the Plague, Compiled from Many Famous Doctors]. This paper is but an interpretative outline of Bartoszewski's work, extremely rich and varied as regards its contents.

Walenty Bartoszewski, a Jesuit preacher and writer, is identified with Jan Bartoszewicz included in the registers of the college in Vilnius. Most probably, the name Walenty was his pen name.¹⁰ There is not much information on the writer – more will possibly be available once Vilnius archives are searched. He was born around 1574 in Lithuania. After graduating in philosophy, he joined the Society of Jesus in 1602. In the years 1609–1618 and from 1627 to around 1633, he was active as a missionary among the people of Vilnius, a prefect of the Pontifical and Diocesan Seminary. In the years 1619–1626, he worked as a missionary in Kroże. According to Jan Okoń, the Jesuit's stay in Kroże resulted from his links with Albrycht Stanisław Radziwiłł, whom he tutored and who founded a Jesuit church in Kroże at that time. Bartoszewski died in Vilnius on 28th (or 27th) March 1645.¹¹

A little more may be learnt about the author from his many different literary works. They are mainly occasional religious pieces, which have not been published or given any serious scholarly attention yet. They include a 1609 dialogue entitled *Rozmowa albo lament Duszy i Ciała potępionych* [Conversation or Lamentation of Souls and Bodies of the Condemned] (a paraphrase of the Mediaeval dispute between the Soul and the Body, best known as *Visio Philiberti*); a collection of songs venerating the Virgin Mary, entitled *Parthenomelica albo Pienia nabożne o Pannie Naświętszej* [Parthenomelica or Pious Songs about Virgin Mary], which also includes musical scores (1613); para-theatrical descriptions of Corpus Christi processions, namely *Pobudka na obchodzenie nabożne świętości rocznej [...]* *Ciała Bożego dana* [Encouragement Given for the Pious Yearly Celebrations of the Feast of Corpus Christi] (1614) and *Dowody procesyjej nabożnej [...]* *w dzień [...]* *Ciała Bożego* [Account of a Pious Procession on the Corpus Christi Day] (1615); descriptions of the Good Friday celebrations: *Cień pogrzebu Pana Jezusowego...* [Shadows of the Funeral of the Lord Jesus Christ] (1630) and *Tęcza przymierza wiecznego. Jezus Chrystus ukrzyżo-*

¹⁰ J. Niedźwiedz, *Kultura literacka Wilna (1323–1655). Retoryczna organizacja miasta*, Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych “Universitas,” 2012, p. 352; J. Okoń, *Dramat i teatr szkolny. Sceny jezuickie XVII wieku*, Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich – Wydawnictwo PAN, 1970, p. 107; M. Lenart, *Spór Duszy z Ciałem i inne wierszowane spory w literaturze staropolskiej na tle tradycji średniowiecznej*, Opole: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego, 2002, p. 78.

¹¹ L. Grzebień, “Bartoszewski, Bartoszewicz, Jan SJ,” in: *Encyklopedia katolicka*, edited by F. Gryglewicz, Vol. 2, Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 1976, p. 87; J. Okoń, op. cit., p. 107.

wany... [Rainbow of the Eternal Covenant. Jesus Christ Crucified] (1633); memorial pieces: *Monodyja Ojczyzny żalobliwej po ześciu* [...] *Adryjana Wojtkowskiego* [Homeland's Mournful Monody on the Death of Adrian Wojtkowski] (1614) and *Threnodiae albo Nagrobne plankty dziewięciu bogiń parnaskich*... [Threnodies or Tombstones of Nine Goddesses of Parnassus] (1615); a collection of panegyrics celebrating King Sigismund III's capture of Smolensk, entitled *Pienia wesole dziatek na przyjazd do Wilna Króla Jego M[ości]*... [Children's Joyful Songs Celebrating the Arrival of His Majesty the King at Vilnius] (1611, 1618) and *Emblema cnót dzielnych* [...] *potomków z* [...] *domu* [...] *Kiszków* [Emblems of Valiant Virtues of the Offspring of the House of Kiszka] (1614). All of Bartoszewski's published works appeared in Vilnius, printed at Jan Karcan's or Jesuit publishing houses.

From the viewpoint of a researcher into literature, the Old Polish texts on the theme of the plague (including those addressed in this article) can be subdivided into three groups: sermons, lay pieces, as well as sacred songs and prayers.¹² One of the earliest Polish works related to plagues is *Recepta duszna i cielesna przeciw powietrzu morowemu z Pisma Świętego i z doświadczonych lekarzów zebrana i ku pożytkowi pospolitemu wydana* [Prescription Against the Plague, for the Soul and the Body, Made for Public Benefit, Based on the Holy Scriptures and Experienced Physicians' Wisdom] (Poznań 1589) by Hieronim Powodowski, King Stephen Báthory's court preacher, theologian and religious writer.¹³ This work is a "therapeutic guidebook for the soul and the body," based mainly on the examples from the Holy Scriptures. The author claims that when one's life is at risk the assistance of a doctor is inadequate, as no medical practitioner can heal a sinful soul in need of an examination of conscience, confession, penance and the Holy Sacrament. Penance is a remedy for the illness of the soul – if one does not attempt to heal the soul, the body cannot be helped either. This view, extremely wide-spread in the old-time writings on epidemics, is based on the conviction that plague is a punishment inflicted on sinners by God. According to Powodowski, the gravest sins punished by plague are heresy, idolatry, blasphemy, negligence of religious worship, cursing God, physical unchastity, gluttony and drunkenness. Hence, the assistance of a clergyman, a "healer of souls," is necessary.

Yet, this does not mean that one should neglect medical therapy – on the contrary. Having presented a "prescription for the soul," the author pays ample attention to practical instructions on prevention and treatment,

¹² This typology was suggested by Piotr Borek in his speech *Staropolskie teksty literackie jako źródła do dziejów epidemii* [Old Polish Literary Texts as Sources on the History of Epidemics] delivered during the nationwide conference (*Pandemie, epidemie i zarazy a historia. Metody badań oraz gospodarcze, społeczne i kulturowe konsekwencje ich występowania – od średniowiecza po XX wiek*) at the Pedagogical University of Cracow of 22nd October 2013.

¹³ J. Ziomek, *Renesans*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1999, p. 406.

e.g. isolation of the sick, dietary principles, adequate amount of sleep, health benefits of physical work and soul's work (i.e. practising the virtues following the example of the saints), the need to soak in lye or fumigate the objects touched by the sick, and to burn herbs to purify the air. Surgical advice is included, e.g. the suggestion to incise the buboes, or even that concerning the mental condition of a human facing danger (e.g. that one must not be afraid of disease or death). Moreover, Powodowski describes the portents of an upcoming epidemic, such as the appearance of a comet, eclipse of the Sun or the Moon. Searching for a scapegoat, the author claims that Poles had previously never opposed God, and turned to sin only under the influence of other nations. The text concludes with *Modlitwa przeciw powietrzu albo śmierci osobliwa* [Special Prayer Against the Plague or Death], i.e. a prayer imploring God to avert his wrath.

Many such preacherly guidebooks appeared when a plague struck: besides Powodowski's work, one must mention *Przestroga pewna przeciw morowemu powietrzu* [Reliable Warning Against the Plague] by an anonymous author (Poznań 1585), *Prezerwatywa moralna od morowego powietrza...*¹⁴ [Moral Safeguard Against the Plague] by Walerian Gutowski, *Koleśa, którą podczas morowego powietrza w powiecie radomskim [...] ś. Mikołaj [...] parafijej swej rozdał [...]* [Christmas Carol which St. Nicolas Gave to His Parish at the Time of the Plague in the County of Radom] by Hiacynt Przetocki (Kraków 1655) or *Prezerwatywa od powietrza morowego...* [Safeguard Against the Plague] by Marcel Dziewulski (Kraków 1720).

Those sermons are linked by their subject matter and instructive character, offering advice for the soul and the body in the face of the threat of a plague. The sacred is penetrated by lay elements, e.g. the methods of social organization at the time of an epidemic. Entreaties to God for the plague to be averted and warnings against the deceptiveness of earthly vanities are intertwined with the information on plague prevention and treatment. Old-time preachers, making their own "prescriptions for the soul and the body" for the time of a plague, resorted to medical guidebooks and treatises by physicians, e.g. Piotr Umiastowski's *Nauka o morowym powietrzu na czwory księgi rozłożona* [Knowledge of the Plague in Four Volumes] (Kraków 1591) or *Instrukcyja abo Nauka, jak się sprawować czasu moru* [Instruction or Knowledge on How to Behave at the Time of the Plague] by Sebastian Petrycy of Pilzno (Kraków 1613). Importantly, the influence of preacherly writings and medical treatises on lyrics may be noticed, as in the case of, *inter alia*, Bartoszewski's work under scrutiny in this article.

As regards strictly literary texts, the subject of the plague was often raised in the pieces invoking the help of the Virgin Mary as the advocate of the plague-stricken, whose intercession may propitiate stern God and avert the plague. The examples here are the Latin elegies: *Dystych elegijny do*

¹⁴ The text of this sermon was published by Wiesław Pawlak, in his volume *Wielcy kaznodzieje Krakowa*, edited by K. Panuś, Kraków: Wydawnictwo "UNUM," 2006, pp. 207–226.

Maryi Panny o powstrzymanie szalejącej zarazy [Elegiac Distich to Virgin Mary Imploring Her to Stop the Raging Plague] by Paweł of Krosno (1515) and *Elegia do Matki Bożej Dziewicy Maryi o uśmierzenie zarazy* [Elegy to Our Lady Imploring Her to Quell the Plague]¹⁵ (a part of *Wojna pruska* [The Prussian War] from 1516) by his disciple, Jan of Wiślica.

The lyrics on the subject of plagues include two more interesting pieces from the volume by Sebastian Fabian Klonowic, entitled *Hebdomas, to jest Siedm tygodniowych piosnek wyjętych z Pierwszych Ksiąg Mojżeszowych kapituly pierwszej, co którego dnia Pan Bóg stworzył i jako siódmego dnia odpoczął* [Hebdomas, i.e. Seven Songs for the Week Quoted after the First Books of Moses, About What the Lord Created on Which Day and How He Rested on the Seventh Day]. This is a collection of religious songs published, together with musical scores, in Cracow in 1581. The theme of the plague is to be found in *Psalm Dawidów XC, czasu powietrza Roku Pańskiego 1572 na polskie przełożony* [David's Psalm No. 90, Translated into Polish at the Time of the Plague in Anno Domini 1572] and the piece closing the whole collection, i.e. *Piosnka uczyniona czasu powietrza, kiedy było interregnum w Roku Pańskim 1572* [Song Composed at the Time of the Plague, During the Interregnum Anno Domini 1572].¹⁶

The theme of the 1629–1632 plague was also addressed by Kasper Twardowski. His *Gęś świętego Marcina albo Pierwsza kołęda* [St. Martin's Goose or the First Carol] from 1630 illustrates the depressing mood prevalent in Lviv at the time of the epidemic that soon spread all over the Polish Commonwealth.¹⁷

Only in the late Renaissance and the early Baroque periods did the first collections of non-liturgical religious songs appear, addressed to a wide Roman Catholic public. Until the mid-16th century, the Catholic hymnal had been a liturgical book known only to the clergy, dedicated only to the aspects of the dogmas.¹⁸ Contrary to Protestant practice, the Catholic Church, for a long time, did not encourage saying prayers in the privacy of one's home, without any priest present.¹⁹ In the 16th–18th centuries, a prominent place was held in the hymnals by the texts on eschatological subjects, including those about plagues.

¹⁵ Both texts have been published in the same anthology: *Przedziwna Matka Stworzyciela Swego. Antologia dawnej polskiej poezji maryjnej*, selected, edited and prefaced by R. Mazurkiewicz, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Księży Marianów MIC, 2008.

¹⁶ S.F. Klonowic, *Hebdomas, to jest Siedm tygodniowych piosnek*, edited by M. Mejor, E. Wojnowska, Warszawa: "Neriton," 2010, p. 31.

¹⁷ J. Nowak-Dłużewski, *Okolicznościowa poezja polityczna w Polsce. Zygmunt III*, Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy "Pax," 1971, pp. 320–321.

¹⁸ S. Nieznanowski, "Kancjonał," in: *Słownik literatury staropolskiej*, edited by T. Michałowska in collaboration with B. Otwinowska, E. Sarnowska-Temierusz, Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 2002, pp. 364–366.

¹⁹ A. Nowicka-Jeżowa, *Pieśni czasu śmierci. Studium z historii duchowości XVI–XVIII wieku*, Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 1992, p. 294.

A researcher into Old Polish “songs of the time of death,” Alina Nowicka-Jeżowa, stresses that Catholic songs are usually contextual, related to a particular place and time. Showing the gap between the fascination with the “vanities” of earthly life and transcendental pursuits, they are imbued with the themes typical of traditional Polish gentry (the hero is *homo socius*, a citizen of the Kingdom of Poland, a Pole and Catholic). They contain numerous references to Mediaeval forms of religiousness, such as pondering over sin, the world, fortune and vanity, *ars moriendi*, didactics of the fear of death, formulas of *Danse Macabre* and the *vado mori* poems related to the iconography of the triumph of death.²⁰ Songs related to death, including those on the subject of plagues, are dispersed in many poem collections.

The development of Catholic canticles in the 17th century was certainly helped by the Society of Jesus, turning songs into a tool of religious propaganda, and endowing them with a specific climate of “collective sensitivity.”²¹ Bartoszewski published a collection of songs in 1613, entitled *Parthenomelica albo Pienia nabożne o Pannie Naświętszej* [Parthenomelica or Pious Songs about the Virgin Mary], appended with musical scores, including the old Polish national anthem *Bogurodzica* [Mother of God]. Not all of these songs were intended for singing.²² Jakub Niedźwiedź points out that popular literature – inclusive of religious songs for the public – often required no contact with a material text, as it was passed on orally (read aloud).²³ Rhythmic lyrics were easy to remember, which influenced their life-span with the believers, but the oral character of such written-text-based songs was secondary.²⁴

The *Bezoar* poems by Bartoszewski may be placed among non-liturgical occasional songs, created at the time of, *inter alia*, natural disasters. They were mainly penitentiary and propitiatory texts, strewn with Marian and hagiographical motifs.²⁵ The borderline between lyric and prayer is blurred in this collection, like in many other religious works.²⁶

The *Bezoar* poems was first published in 1624, in relation to the plague epidemic in Vilnius,²⁷ which struck the town then and continued until 1626. The 1630 reprint was related to another attack of the plague, in the years 1629–1632.²⁸ No doubt, publishing the collection for the second time was motivated by demand, caused by increased religiousness when so many

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 309, 355–364, 367.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 33, 302, 348–349; J. Niedźwiedź, op. cit., p. 73.

²² A. Nowicka-Jeżowa, op. cit., p. 296.

²³ J. Niedźwiedź, op. cit., p. 69.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 398.

²⁵ M. Korolko, “Pieśń religijna,” in: *Słownik literatury staropolskiej...*, p. 652.

²⁶ J. Niedźwiedź, op. cit., p. 402.

²⁷ In the years 1624–1625, the epidemic swept most of Polish towns. Besides Vilnius, it depopulated, *inter alia*, Poznań, Warsaw, Cracow and Gdańsk. See: A. Karpiński, op. cit., pp. 70, 314.

²⁸ See the tabular data – *ibid.*, p. 314.

lives were endangered – as emphasized by the author on the title page: “published for the second time, with a supplement, at the request of godly people, with the permission of the superiors.”²⁹ Bartoszewski dedicated his work to the municipal council of Vilnius, which is hardly surprising, considering the role played during an epidemic by the councillors – they appointed the so-called plague officers, i.e. special epidemic-time mayors, responsible for organizing the assistance for people staying in the town, and employing the necessary staff: physicians (usually very-well-paid) for the sick, their assistants, barbers, barber-surgeons, priests performing pastoral service, as well as sanitary workers: carriers for transporting the bodies, executioners, gravediggers, women and clerics tending to the sick in the isolation wards, etc.³⁰

Old Polish sources identify several causes of epidemics. Scholars claimed that plagues were caused by the arrangement of stars and planets, affecting human health, which was associated with Hippocrates’s humoralism.³¹ The links between astrology, science and religion go back to antiquity – ancient Babylonians and Egyptians believed in man’s dependence on the position of celestial bodies, which they considered as tools in the hands of gods.³² Fathers of the Church condemned astrology, but appreciated the merits of applied astrology, called natural astrology.³³ In the Renaissance, increased interest in antiquity stimulated studies of astrology, which became a university subject (in Cracow, it happened in 1453), researched by the most eminent scholars, e.g. Galileo Galilei.³⁴ Besides the astrological theory, there was a theurgic theory, perceiving the plague as punishment for sins, sent on humans by God.³⁵ Such an approach gave rise to so-called iatro-theology, i.e. the theory claiming that disease or recovery depends on God’s will, while man can propitiate the stern Creator by doing penance and trusting the intercession of the saints.³⁶ Thus, peculiar hagiography emerged – to quote Antonina Jelicz, “if a Cracow’s burgher fell ill, he would not always consult physicians or healers first. If he was very pious, he turned to the saints in whose intervention he believed.”³⁷

²⁹ All the quotations from Bartoszewski’s original work have been taken from the 1630 edition, a copy of which is held by the library of the Jagiellonian University, with the ref. No.: BJ St. Dr. 1617 I (Mf. 1010). Since that volume is defective, the missing page B4 (passages of the 3rd and 4th songs) studied is the one from the volume stored in the National Library (ref. No.: XVII 3.5258).

³⁰ A. Karpiński, op. cit., pp. 80–99; S. Namaczyńska, op. cit., p. 99.

³¹ J. Kracik, *Pokonać czarną śmierć...*, pp. 117–118; A. Karpiński, op. cit., p. 298; H. Powodowski, *Recepta duszna i cielesna przeciw powietrzu morowemu* [...], Poznań, 1589, p. B.

³² J. Kracik, *Chrześcijaństwo kontra magia. Historyczne perypetie*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo M, 2012, p. 93.

³³ Ibid., pp. 95–96.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 98.

³⁵ A. Karpiński, op. cit., pp. 33–35.

³⁶ J. Kracik, *Chrześcijaństwo kontra magia...*, p. 106.

³⁷ A. Jelicz, op. cit., p. 82.

The astrological and theurgic theories were not contradictory, as people believed that celestial bodies were arranged unfavourably to man by God himself. Such a belief resulted in blurring the line between religion and medicine in the face of a disease, including the plague: even physicians advocated putting the spiritual issues to rights, and many guidebooks recommended doing penance besides herbal therapy.

The theurgic theory underlies the beliefs expressed in Bartoszewski’s song collection. Convinced that the plague was God’s punishment for man’s sins, he offers a remedy to the terrified reader – the songs, which will help appease the just Judge’s wrath. As if he were a medical professional, the author makes out a prescription, but the medicine is for the soul, rather than the body. The title of the song collection is explained by the poet in his dedicatory letter:

Honourable Gentlemen, so gracious to me, I have entitled this book *Bezoar*, whose origins are described by some as follows: a deer, which often eats snakes and slithery creatures that he catches scent of, runs quickly to find water and drink of it when vermin starts proliferating in his intestines, lest he should get poisoned; soaked up to the nose, he sheds tears which get as hard as hazelnuts in the corners of his eyes. Once he is rid of the venom, he gets out of water and rubs himself against a tree, relieving his eyes of these little stones. Others say that in Persia and India there are goat- or doe-shaped animals from whose entrails a little stone is taken out, called bezoar. It has various descriptions, but the stone has a powerful virtue, known by eminent experienced physicians: if it is administered, with a little wine, to people suffering from the plague, they will be truly relieved of the venom. This is because it induces such perspiration, that the whole body seems to be pouring with sweat, so all the venom is rinsed off.³⁸

Medical dictionaries define bezoar as “a stone of hair, a foreign body in the stomach or intestines, made of the hair from the patient’s head (often mixed with swallowed plant fibres), in the form of a ball or acorn.”³⁹ Such stones may be also found in the kidneys, bladder or stomach of various animals. As confirmed by the excerpt from the above-quoted letter, bezoars were believed to have unique therapeutic qualities. They were recommended to be administered in powder form, which was supposed to have a diaphoretic effect.⁴⁰ Bartoszewski gives his volume of poetry the figurative title

³⁸ The original text: “Dalem, mnie wielce M[ilościwi] M[ości] Panowie, tej książce nazwisko *Bezoar*, którego początek badacze rzeczy przyrodzonych tak jedni opisują: jelenź za częstym jadanem gadzin i węzów, które wiatrem nozdrz z lochów wyciąga, skoro mu w wnętrznościach robactwo się wylęże, żeby mu jad onych nie zaszkodził, wskok do źróźdła wód bieży, gdzie gdy aż do nozdrz się zamoczy, lzy jego polekku ze wnętrz na oczy się wylewają, które lipkością swą w źrzenicznych kącikach na kształt orzechów laskowych zrastają i w twardość się obracają, a gdy w sobie nic jadu nie czuje, wyszedzsy z wody, otarciem o drzewo on kamyczek z oczu na ziemię strzasa. Drudzy: są (prawi) w Persyje i w Indyjej niektóre zwierzeta na kształt kóz albo jelenic, z których wnętrzności skrytych kamyczka dobywają i bezoarem go nazywają. Jako chcą, niech go opisują. Atoli ten kamyczek z potężnej swej cnoty przeciwko wszelakiej truciznie taką ma od poważnych i starych z dawna medyków zaletę, że powietrzem morowym zarażeni, zażywając go z trochę wina, skuteczne uwolnienie jadu odnoszą, bo taki pot mocą się jego wzbudza, iż zda się niejako wszystko ciało rozpływać, zaczym wszystkie jad oraz się wymiata.”

³⁹ *Wielki słownik medyczny*, p. 103.

⁴⁰ J. Kracik, *Pokonać czarną śmierć...*, p. 35; A. Karpiński, op. cit., p. 181.

of *Bezoar...*, as the songs play the role of a “penitential stone” that should bring God’s forgiveness, as described by the author in the poem *Do czytelnika* [To the Reader]:

Co to za dziw, że z ludzkich łez bezoarowy
Kamyczek się utworzył na zapał morowy.
Z jelenich łez kamyczek bezoar powstawa,
Który tajemnej mocy jawne skutki dawa.
Weź też ty ten bezoar, zażyj, doznasz cnoty,
Iż serce Boskie miękczy, rwie niebieskie ploty
(From: *Do czytelnika*).

[What a wonder it is that a bezoar stone has formed from man’s tears to cure the plague. It is from a deer’s tears that a bezoar stone is formed, and its secret powers are well-proven. You should take this bezoar as medicine, too, and you will see its virtues: God’s heart will be touched and softened in heaven.]⁴¹

The author defines the purpose of the songs precisely and points to their addressee – they have been written “to encourage deeper remorse and to comfort the souls of those who have left to escape the Lord’s wrath, those who had to stay in their houses because of poverty, and those afraid of the Lord’s punishing hand.” Thus, the poems were written for the impoverished common residents of Vilnius who – facing the plague – could not afford to leave the town or, simply, had nowhere to go to, as well as for the wealthy burghers who left the town in panic.

Following Hippocrates’s advice (“*Cito pestem fugere, longe a loco infecto recedere, tarde reverti domum*”), 16th- and 17th-century physicians recommended fleeing the plague-stricken area as the best means of prevention.⁴² Usually, after noticing the first deaths caused by the plague in a town, the royal court would leave, as well as the noblemen, town councillors and the wealthiest burghers.⁴³ Those who remained in the town were the mayors appointed for the time of the plague, specially hired sanitary staff, the clerics offering pastoral services and tending to the sick, as well as impoverished town dwellers. Well-educated physicians often left together with the rich, and those who stayed where only barbers, barber-surgeons and healers, for whom the plague was a risky opportunity of getting rich, since if they undertook to tend to the sick they could usually count on high remuneration from the town’s coffers.⁴⁴ Doubtless, plebeians were the social group who were most exposed to the risk of dying of the plague, being the worst fed and the least immune to bacteria. Also, a large percentage of the peasants who had fled their villages to escape famine died in town streets, decimated by various contagious diseases.⁴⁵

⁴¹ The translations in square brackets have been made in prose, for the purpose of introducing the reader to the contents and imagery of Bartoszewski’s poetry, with no pretence to artistic mastery.

⁴² A. Karpiński, op. cit., pp. 168, 223; J. Kracik, *Pokonać czarną śmierć...*, p. 28.

⁴³ A. Karpiński, op. cit., pp. 225–226; S. Namaczyńska, op. cit., p. 78.

⁴⁴ J. Kracik, *Pokonać czarną śmierć...*, p. 40.

⁴⁵ J.I. Kraszewski, op. cit., p. 309; A. Karpiński, op. cit., p. 229; S. Namaczyńska, op. cit., p. 61.

Natural disasters were the most frequent cause of the spread of epidemics. Analysing the data in Stanisława Namaczyńska's *Kronika klęsk elementarnych w Polsce i w krajach sąsiednich w latach 1648–1696* [Chronicle of Natural Disasters in Poland and Neighbouring Countries in the Years 1648–1696], it is hardly difficult to conclude that the second half of the 17th century was a period of poor harvests exhausting the country, caused by such calamities as severe frosts, downpours, floods, hailstorms or droughts. The interdependence becomes less surprising once you realize that particular natural disasters followed the laws of cause and effect. One climatic factor triggered a wave of consequences, often tragic to the population. Prolonged spans of drought or intense rain, as well as the wars constantly besetting Poland in the 17th century, caused poor harvests, which raised food prices, thus leading to famine, making the inhabitants of certain areas flee to the regions where prices were lower.⁴⁶ Andrzej Karpiński claims that famine was an inseparable companion of the plague in the Polish Commonwealth, as the periods of widespread hunger concurred with the years of the most calamitous epidemics: 1570–1573, 1589–1590, 1598–1602, 1621–1625, 1628–1631, 1655–1660 and 1708–1712.⁴⁷ Malnutrition weakened human bodies, making them unable to resist the disease.

The social group running an especially high risk of dying because of the plague were the priests and monks who undertook to provide the infected people with pastoral service (mainly with the sacraments) and to look after them once the physicians had fled. According to Karpiński's calculations, the largest losses were incurred by Polish and Lithuanian Jesuits.⁴⁸ In a plague-stricken town, only a few (not more than a dozen or so) appointed priests stayed, who received special remuneration.⁴⁹ Monks were usually more eager in their ministry than parochial clergymen – besides spiritual guidance, they took up tending to the sick in hospitals, field hospitals and isolation wards.⁵⁰ The particular dedication of Jesuits to providing the care for the dying of the plague in Vilnius was also described by Józef Ignacy Kraszewski: “Jesuits picked up from the streets the people whom the hospitals could not accommodate, and made efforts so that the municipal authorities would appoint caretakers charged with the duty of tending to the wretched crowds [...]. Apart from that, to fight the famine, Jesuits collected contributions from the well-to-do and bought food for the needy. Twelve of them fell victim to their zeal.”⁵¹

The lyrical subject of the 4th song in Bartoszewski's volume, *Gwoli tym, co się w mieście zostaną czasu powietrza* [For Those Who Remain in Town

⁴⁶ S. Namaczyńska, op. cit., *passim*.

⁴⁷ A. Karpiński, op. cit., pp. 23–24.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 203.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 86–87.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 129, 149.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 142; J.I. Kraszewski, op. cit., pp. 309–310.

at the Time of the Plague] finds himself in the situation of those, who have not been able to flee the plague-stricken town:

Pozostałem się, Boże, w pośrodku pożaru,
Gdzie śmierć zażywa srogich morderstw bez pomiaru,
Pozostałem się w rękę twej zapalczywości,
Panie, tyś mię chciał mieć w tej snadź niebezpieczności.
Rad bym był gdzie uskoczył podtenczas na stronę
I tam przed gniewem twoim jaką miał uchronę,
Ale nie mając o czym podjąć się tej drogi,
Tu między ubogimi zostałem ubogi

(From the 4th song).

[I have remained, my God, amidst the fire, where death is raging cruelly and intemperately. I have remained in the hands of your impetuosity, since you, my Lord, seem to wish to hold me in this uncertainty. I would happily run away to a distant place to flee from your wrath, but I have no wealth, so being poor I have remained among the poor.]

In turn, in the 8th song, *Gwoli tym, co z miasta wyjeżdżają przed powietrzem* [For Those Leaving the Town to Flee the Plague], you can read:

Jednak uchodzę, aboś kędy się utaję
I bojąc się twej różgi, grzechów się ukaję.
[...]
Przeto się kryję, Boże, przed twą sierdziwością,
Abym nie zginął z swoją oraz nieprawością.
A ty jako Pan dobry na ucieczkę moję
Patrząc, tym się uraczysz, że się ciebie boję [...]

(From the 8th song).

[Yet, I am taking flight, hoping to take refuge somewhere. Afraid of Your rod, I will repent for my sins... Thus, I am hiding from Your wrath, my God, so that I will not perish in all my depravity. And I hope that – looking at my flight – You, a good Lord, will content Yourself with my fear.]

Bartoszewski's biographical entry in *Encyklopedia katolicka* suggests that he stayed in Kroże in the years 1619–1627 and 1636–1637. In his dedicatory letter appended to *Bezoar...*, he writes: “Honourable Gentlemen, so gracious to me [...], under whose protection and vigilance we are staying alive in Vilnius, by God's grace,” but it is hard to formulate – merely on that basis – the thesis that he did stay in the town in 1630. The answer to this question may be hidden in the archives of Vilnius. Nevertheless, the foregoing song excerpts illustrating two different attitudes in the face of the plague attest to the author's understanding of those who tried to save their lives by fleeing and those who put their lives in danger by staying in the town.

A significant role in looking after town dwellers was played by the members of religious brotherhoods. Bartoszewski himself was a member of St. Nicodemus Brotherhood, established in Vilnius after the outbreak of the plague in 1625,⁵² operating under the patronage of the Society of Jesus

⁵² J.I. Kraszewski, op. cit., p. 348; A. Karpiński, op. cit., pp. 143, 166, 263.

“to assist the poor,”⁵³ as described by him in *Tęcza przymierza wiecznego. Jezus Chrystus ukrzyżowany* [Rainbow of the Eternal Covenant. Jesus Christ Crucified] in 1633. There, the author outlines the tasks of the brethren: caring after and tending to the sick, especially the homeless and vagrants, organizing financial assistance by collecting donations from the wealthy, as well as burying the bodies:

Wzbudził Bóg bractwo, które ile mu sił stawa,
Chorych zbiera z ulice, karmi i napawa,
Grzebie zmarłe, a czego ubogim nie staje,
Przez nie enych ludzi hojność wzbudzona dodaje.
[...]
Tobie się przypisuje ta po Bogu sprawa,
O Societas Iesu, i ta cna zaprawa.
Twym gorliwym powodem nowe bractwa wstają
I upadłym ratunek pewny chętnie dają.
[...]
Jak gdy tęcza na niebie w wdzięcznej swej ozdobie,
Tak się bractwo to szyrzy na pomoc chudobie
(From *Tęcza przymierza...*)⁵⁴

[God has brought forth a society, who – with all their strength – pick up the sick from the streets, feed them and quench their thirst, bury the dead, and give them what they need through the charity inspired in others... By God’s grace, due merit should be given to *Societas Iesu*. It is because of their zeal that new brotherhoods are established to help sinners in need... This brotherhood spreads to help the impoverished as if a rainbow with which the skies are embellished.]

Twenty-four songs in the *Bezoar* collection can be subdivided into several groups, depending on the addressee. Most of them are propitiatory pieces addressed to God the Father and Christ, expressive of the awareness of sinful human nature, human subjection to the Maker’s will, and seeking hope in the Passion of Christ, requesting His mercy and appeasing His wrath. Another group are the songs asking the intercession of the saints with God. The final four texts are addressed to the Mother of God, the advocate of the plague-stricken. In these songs, the sacred meets the realities of the plague time. Numerous references to the Holy Scriptures can be found there too. The hero of the collection is a sinner, aware of his sins (in some songs, he speaks on behalf of all the frightened people of the town hit by the plague), begging God for rescue.

The lyrical subject of the first song is convinced that sinful man cannot hide from God’s eyes, who has sent “the death-head plague” on him. Quoting biblical examples of God’s wrath (the Amorite kings, the pharaoh, Jonah, Moses, King David, etc.), he proves that God’s decrees are unavoidable, and

⁵³ W. Bartoszewski, *Tęcza przymierza wiecznego. Jezus Chrystus ukrzyżowany* [...], Wilno, 1633, the title page.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. C.

the only hope to escape the Lord's wrath is doing penance, symbolized by a bezoar stone, and reflecting on the Passion of Christ:

Pobiegę wskok do źródła męki Syna twego
I ponurzę się wszytek w skrytości ran jego.
Tam w krople łez obrócę duszy mej zakąły
I z serca je wyleję przez oczne kanały,
Uczynię z nich bezoar, kamyczek pokuty,
I wiele-się-kroć jadem uczuję być struty.
Utrę go w stroskanego mózdzierzu sumnienia
I roztworzę wódkami oczu swych strumienia,
Którego zażywając, wszystkie nieczystoty
Ze wnętrza wyrzucę na wierzch przez pokutne poty.
Posiłę się konfektem z niebieskiej apteki,
Z której na duszną niemoc niepochybne leki
(From the 1st song).

[I will hastily run to the source of Your Son's passion, and I will plunge altogether in the secrecy of His wounds. There, I will turn my soul's sins into tears, and I will get them out of my heart through my eyes' channels. I will turn them into a bezoar, a little stone of penance. Every time I feel poisoned, I will grind it in the mortar of my conscience and dilute it with the liquor of my eye's streams. And when I swallow it, I will rid myself of all the impurities through the sweat of penance, taking a pill from the heavenly apothecary, who gives unfailing medicine for soul ailments.]

Using medical terminology, Bartoszewski refers to the idea that healing the body is impossible without healing the sinful soul. Penance and full acceptance of God's decrees, in imitation of Christ, are what the just Judge expects of the sinners and what may protect them from the "fire of the plague." The hero of the second songs repeats that the only rescue from the plague is referring to Christ's redemptive death, which is "the fortress, a solid armour," the last hope of the wretched sinners. "Christ suffering on the cross may be a sign of hope for the people who are sick or suffer greatly."⁵⁵ That is why the image of the Crucified is invoked in the face of the deadly plague. Remembering the crucifixion, it is easier to accept one's own fate and to overcome the fear, as putting one's trust in suffering Christ has a therapeutic and consolatory value. The passion and death of Christ endow man's suffering with meaning, they are the evidence of His mercy, giving hope for saving one's life ("If you love Jesus with your heart upright, He'll always look on you with His eyes bright"). The sinner implores God:

Twoja śmierć (niechaj to wszystkim powiem)
Jest mi żywotem i wiecznym zdrowiem.
Niech mię, jako chce, wielkość grzechów moich trwoży,
Nie stracham się, gdy mi się w myślach śmierć twa mnoży
(From the 1st song).

⁵⁵ A. Grün OSB, *Krzyż. Symbol odkupionego człowieka*, translated by M. Ruta, Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM, 1998, p. 25.

[Your death (let it be known to all) is my life and eternal health. Even though I am appalled at the gravity of my sins, I am no longer frightened when I think of the enormity of Your death.]

The condition for completing penance is to confess the sins which have brought God's wrath upon the people: pride, abandoning oneself to bodily pleasures, gluttony, wrath, envy and sloth. Man can find rescue from his imperfect sinful nature by heeding the humility and sacrifice of Christ, who gave his own life on the cross. The cross may become a weapon with which to fight one's own vice, a sort of "a safeguard against the plague," as in Dziewulski's sermon in 1720, or a balm to the wounds of the dying, as Mateusz of Cracow claimed.⁵⁶

Gdzie szukasz, człecze? Owo twa obrona:
Rozwiódł na krzyżu Pan swoje ramiona,
Rozciągnął ręce ochotnie obie,
Gotów grzesznika przygarnąć k sobie

(From the 2nd song).

[What are you looking for, man? This is where your protection lies: it is your Lord who stretched his arms willingly on the cross, eager to take the sinner in His arms.]

The confession of the urge to give oneself fully to Christ is continued in the third song, where the lyrical subject declares the need to mortify oneself to commemorate God's martyrdom. Given the desperate hardships of earthly life shown in the further part of the collection, and the entreaties for driving the plague away, it must be stressed that the wish to share in Christ's suffering on the cross has a symbolic dimension, based on the intention to enter the transcendental, on the wish to escape from the realities of the town where people are dying in large numbers and there is no stopping the march of avaricious death:

Wydroż w mym sercu rany swe goździami
A napełń blizny twojej krwie rzekami,
Abych z nich boleść twoją czerpał srogą,
Czerpał i miłość twą niezmiernie mnogą,
[...]
Niech to za własne mam swoje wesele
Obelgę zność twoją na swym ciele
I z tobą cierpieć rany twoje krwawe,
Rozkosz to moja i kochanie prawe

(From the 3rd song).

[Pierce my heart with the nails of Your wounds, fill my scars with the rivers of Your blood so that I will feel Your cruel suffering and draw on Your immeasurable love... Let it be my own happiness to bear Your wounds on my body, and to share in Your bloody suffering. This will be my joy and delight.]

The hero of the fourth song, who has remained in the town despite the plague raging there, trusts God's decrees, even though they are incomprehensible to people. He is convinced that nothing happens against God's will,

⁵⁶ J. Kracik, *Chrześcijaństwo kontra magia...*, pp. 107–108.

so the sick or those running the risk of becoming infected should treat either death or recovery as an expression of His will. Listing examples of biblical characters who faced deadly dangers but were saved by God's ruling is not intended as an analysis of the contents of the Holy Scriptures or explaining their meanings. It has got a pragmatic dimension of proving the convictions professed in the songs. This is another example of the reassuring function of Bartoszewski's poems.

In the sixth song, the sacred is invaded by the profane – the poem depicts the cruel reality of living in an epidemic-struck town. The author describes the symptoms of the disease: fever, pain, dizziness, skin lesions, loss of strength, blue and dry mouths, black tongues, painful ulcers, etc. These drastic glimpses of the life in a town overwhelmed by the plague are to be the arguments used in the conversation with God, who is asked by the lyrical subject:

I tak-że lud twój, krwią twą oplacony,
Marnie ma ginąć, Boże niezmierny?
I tak-że trudy twe niepoliczone
Dla naszych grzechów mają być zlekczony?

(From the 6th song).

[Should Your own people, redeemed with Your own blood, perish so shabbily, my Lord almighty? Should all the cruel pains You bore to rid us of our sins be in vain?]

The conclusion from this and many other passages is that a sinner negotiates with God, rather than merely begs; he gives his own arguments in a one-person dispute, delivering a monologue that is his reply to the death sent by the Maker. Jan Kracik⁵⁷ notices that it is an attempt to persuade God to cancel the penalty. A similar role of arguing Him into making some concessions is played by the repeated references to God's mercy and pity, coupled with calling Him "the dispenser of health," promising to praise His kindness if one's life is saved, and emphasizing the fact that man has been created in his Father's image.

Będziem ci śpiewać: „Okazał nad nami
Bóg nasz swą litość, nad rąk swych czynami,
Któremu niechaj będzie chwała wieczna
I sława z Ojcem i z Duchem społeczną”

(From the 6th song).

[We will sing: "Our God has shown mercy to us, to those whom He made with His own hands. May He enjoy eternal glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit."]

Pomni, że ręce twe nas ulepiły
I kształt urody twej w nas wyraziły,
Jakoż srożyć się na twe dzieło może

Mór ten, o Boże?

(From the 7th song).

⁵⁷ J. Kracik, *Pokonać czarną śmierć...*, p. 133.

[Remember that it is Your hands that have moulded us in Your likeness. Can You allow the plague to ravage Your creation, my Lord?]

Cóż twa za sława, że zniszczysz nędzaka,
Człeka robaka?

(From the 15th song).

[What glory can You gain by destroying a worm, a man?]

Kracik also notices the utilitarian reciprocity of the votive practices.⁵⁸ Each attempt to beg God to change his mind is supported with the promise that His name and Christ’s mercy will be praised and that the Mother of God will be worshipped.

Będziem wyznawać, żeś jest Pan sprawiedliwy,
Ale żeś z przyrodzenia i litościwy,
Ześ za występ ubiwszy nas pożałował
I od morowych pożóg zdrowo uchował

(From the 8th song).

[We will praise You as a just Lord whose heart is merciful, who punished us for our misdeeds and then took pity on us, delivering us from pestilence.]

Describing the tragic realities of the plague-stricken town, the hero of the poems tries to make God aware of how harsh His punishment is, and thus inspire pity and reverse the sentence of death, which is cutting people down regardless of their social hierarchy or age:

Obacz, co zapalczywość twa dokazała,
Że po ulicach ludzkie tak leżą ciała,
Jak snopie ostrożębym sierpem porznione,
Po polach w żartkoletnim znoju złożone.
Nikomiu nie przepuszcza: to służę z panem,
To bohatera równa z lichym poddanem,
To małżonkę od męża, męża od żony
Odstrzyga, zostawując żal rozrzewniony.
Życzliwe matki córek przed karą srogą
Ani ojcowie synów ochronić mogą,
Inne dziatki rodziców nagle tracają,
W sieroctwie oplakanym wiecznie zostają

(From the 9th song).

[Look at what Your wrathfulness has done, at the bodies lying in the streets like sheaves reaped with a sharp sickle, put together in the fields after a hot day’s work. No one is spared, a servant is made equal to a lord, a hero to a villain, wives are cut away from the husbands, left in sorrow. Loving mothers cannot protect their daughters from the harsh punishment, fathers cannot save their sons. Children lose their parents and become weeping orphans.]

The above-quoted excerpt is a perfect illustration of the tragedy and solitude of a man living in the constant fear that any contact with a neighbour may bring death. Distrust, suspicion and fear of another man must

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 142.

have resulted in breaking up neighbourly and family ties.⁵⁹ Bartoszewski is evidently interested in the mental condition of someone staying in a town hit by a plague: the despair of being parted from loved ones, loneliness, uncertainty of the future day and almost complete helplessness in the face of the disease. Death could lurk anywhere, was almost palpable, bodies often lay just round the corner, as gravediggers had no time to bury them carefully and quickly. Usually, it was death in solitude, without confession or a dignified funeral – people were often buried in makeshift graves (often mass graves) outside the town.

In Bartoszewski's volume, the attributes of death decimating the people of Vilnius – which has many traits of the Mediaeval Grim Reaper – are plague arrows, a scythe, a birch rod and a sword. It is depicted as an invader ravaging the lands of the kingdom of Poland:

Bo śmierciogroźny ku nam gość przychodzi,
Tak na wiek młody, jak na stary godzi,
[...]
I gdzie się jego podmyka podniata,
Tam wielki w ludziach pobój i utrata [...]
(From the 12th song).

[It is a death-bringing guest that comes to us, he strikes the young, as well as the old... Wherever he makes his appearance, a great many people are slain.]

It is an untimely death, untamed, most terrifying because you cannot prepare for it by receiving the sacraments, bidding farewell to the family, preparing a testament, etc. In the *Bezoar* poems, “the daughter of sin” is a triumphant force, an element striking out at the world suddenly, out of the blue, decimating terrified sinners. It is compared to a sudden fire consuming a town – its dwellers are not prepared for it, all they can do is weep and pray:

Ku tobie ręce wznosim, Ojczy sprawiedliwy,
Do ciebie wylewamy płacz i głos rzewliwy,
Abyś nas bronić raczył od klęski morowej,
Gdzie nagła śmierć zażywa swęj mocy surowęj.
Pomni w dzień gniewu i w dzień swęj popędliwości
Na swe nieprzeczepane i hojne litości,
A zagasić ten pożar chcięj nienasycony,
Obrzydłęj złości naszej żagwią zaniecony
(From the 5th song).

[It is to You that we raise our hands, our just Father, to You we complain weeping. We are begging You to protect us from pestilence, as sudden death is raging cruelly. On this day of Your wrath, please remember about Your immeasurable mercy and deign to extinguish this fire kindled by the torch of our deplorable wrongdoings.]

⁵⁹ A. Karpiński, op. cit., p. 233.

At the time of the plague, religious practices became intensified: pilgrimages to the holy shrines, processions organized with the intention of averting God's wrath, numerous propitiatory services, vows made by whole towns, e.g. to erect a church or an altar, publication of penitentiary-propitiatory songs or religious booklets.⁶⁰ A collective model of religiousness was promoted, as it gave the feeling of belonging, while sacred rituals restored the unsettled sense of safety,⁶¹ which – in fact – was illusive, as public gatherings made the spread of the plague bacteria even easier. Characteristically, the worship of the so-called plague patrons increased, with two most popular ones: St. Sebastian and St. Roch.⁶²

As the plague was depicted as a rain of arrows falling from the sky onto people already in antiquity,⁶³ and arrows were a symbol of sudden disease and quick death since late Middle Ages, it was believed that praying to St. Sebastian, miraculously saved from death, could protect believers from becoming infected.⁶⁴ The saint is usually depicted as a youth tied to a post, pierced with arrows in the places where the plague buboes would often appear.⁶⁵ His worship as a plague patron spread in Poland especially in the 15th century.

In the centuries to come, St. Roch was more popular.⁶⁶ When travelling, he arrived at a town struck by the plague and began tending to the sick. Sometimes, he was even able to cure them with the sign of the cross. Helping the plague-stricken, he got infected himself, but managed to survive. While returning to his home country, he was arrested on the border as an Italian spy, and died after five years in prison. St. Roch is usually depicted as a traveller with a pilgrim's staff in his hand and a dog at his side, pointing with his finger to a plague bubo on his thigh.⁶⁷

The veneration of St. Sebastian and St. Roch spread all over Europe, including Poland, where both martyrs were made patrons of churches, as well as hospitals where the plague-stricken were looked after, e.g. St. Sebastian and St. Roch's Hospital in Cracow.⁶⁸ Less popular plague patrons in Poland included Stanisław Kostka, Jan of Dukla, Kajetan, Cosmas and Damian, Jan Kanty, Karol Boromeusz and Rosalia of Palermo.⁶⁹

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 118–119, 250–251, 254; S. Namaczyńska, op. cit., p. 81; J. Kracik, *Pokonać czarną śmierć...*, p. 132.

⁶¹ J. Kracik, *Pokonać czarną śmierć...*, p. 107.

⁶² A. Karpiński, op. cit., pp. 25–29, 102.

⁶³ J. Kracik, *Pokonać czarną śmierć...*, p. 157.

⁶⁴ A. Karpiński, op. cit., pp. 239–240.

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 243, 248–249; J. Kracik, *Pokonać czarną śmierć...*, p. 160.

⁶⁶ A. Karpiński, op. cit., pp. 239–240; J. Kracik, *Pokonać czarną śmierć...*, p. 161.

⁶⁷ A. Karpiński, op. cit., pp. 239–240, 242–243; J. Kracik, *Pokonać czarną śmierć...*, pp. 161–164; [Brewiarz.pl](http://www.brewiarz.pl), *Święty Roch*, <http://www.brewiarz.pl/czytelnia/swieci/08-16b.php3> (dostęp: 20.01.2014).

⁶⁸ J. Kracik, *Pokonać czarną śmierć...*, pp. 93–95, 159; S. Namaczyńska, op. cit., p. 100.

⁶⁹ A. Karpiński, op. cit., pp. 241, 243–244; S. Namaczyńska, op. cit., p. 101; J. Kracik, *Pokonać czarną śmierć...*, p. 166.

In the eleventh song, the collective lyrical subject addresses not only Christ, but also invokes the assistance and intercession of the Mother of God, as well as such plague saints as St. Casimir the Jagiellonian (a Polish prince, the patron saint of Lithuania, canonized in 1602),⁷⁰ St. Benno (a bishop of the diocese of Meissen), St. Eustace and St. Roch. In turn, the twelfth song is devoted entirely to St. Sebastian. Again, the hardships that the dwellers of Vilnius must face during the epidemic are emphasized here, such as inadequate number of gravediggers ready to bury the dead bodies, resulting in corpses lying in the streets, which fall prey to hungry animals or are thrown into rivers. The author refers to the death of St. Sebastian, believing that the martyr can understand the suffering of the people:

Przez twą sromotną u słupa obnażę
I przez szkodliwą strzałami urażę
W rękach i w nogach, przez mąk twoich wiele
Podjętych w ciele,
O męczenniku, cny Sebestyjanie,
Usłysz płaczący nasz głos i wołanie
A to nam zjednaj, o co prosim ciebie,
U Boga w niebie
(From the 12th song).

[Due to the humble nakedness of Your body tied to the post and torn with arrows, due to Your bodily pains, hear us, Sebastian, oh virtuous martyr, hear our weeping voices that beg You to intercede on our behalf with God in heaven.]

The thirteenth song, *O odwrócenie miecza, głodu i moru* [For the Sword, Famine and the Plague to Be Averted] points to two inseparable companions of the plague: famine and war, i.e. the factors often directly responsible for an outbreak of the plague. Hostilities made it impossible to sow the fields or trade. Local people had to feed the soldiers, while the crops were ruined or pillaged by enemy troops, which caused poor harvest, which brought famine and epidemics. When towns were besieged, their dwellers suffered from poverty, famine and lack of clean water,⁷¹ which made them susceptible to disease. In Bartoszewski's text, these three calamities are called "the three-pronged pest" sent from above:

Przetoś zesłał trózębą plagę rozniewany:
Nieprzyjacioły różne i harde pogany,
By nam bracia w okowy i łyka wplątali
A na pokarm bestyjom ciała ich miotali.
Przywiodeś głód nieznośny i ciężkie łaknienie
Na wielkie naszym krajom okwitym zniszczenie,
Bogatycheś zatrwożył serca ku zneedniałym,

⁷⁰ F. Papée, *Święty Kazimierz, król Polski*, Lwów: nakładem Macierzy Polskiej, 1902, p. 45.

⁷¹ S. Namaczyńska, op. cit., pp. 27, 34–35, 55, 77.

Niemasz, kto by z nich podał chleba kęs zgłodniałym,
Puściłeś i powietrze jadem zakażone,
Miasta i wsi miotelką już są wymiecione,
Zewsząd strach: stąd miecz krwawy, stąd też głód teskliwy,
Stąd mór ostry naciera jak ogień żarliwy

(From the 13th song).

[Irate, You have sent the three-pronged pest: enemies and ruthless heathens who enthrall our brothers and feed their dead bodies to beasts. You have brought forth unbearable hunger, severe famine, which ruins our land, which makes the rich afraid of the poor, so there is no one to give a piece of bread to the starving. You have sent us air poisoned with venom, too, so our towns and hamlets are swept clean. Fear is everywhere, of a blood-thirsty sword, of starvation and of the plague raging like a fire.]

The sinner entreats God for rescue, praising His mercy and pity, calling him a doctor (“Heal us, our Lord, and we shall be healed”). A dramatic vision of the starving town is repeated in the fourteenth and fifteenth songs (which have “in the Time of Famine” in their titles). The poet once again shows detailed causes and effects of famine:

Wejrzy na nędzę naszą, na głód i na drogość,
Dla której twych ubogich wielka ginie mnogość.
Od niedostatku jednych puchlina rozpycha,
Drudzy schną, jako w ręku gdy różga usycha

(From the 14th song).

[Look at our deprivation, famine and high food prices, which make the poor ones die in great numbers. For want of food, some of them get swollen, others get emaciated like a broken twig that is withered.]

The lack of food makes people “eat what harms their constitution,” which in turn can cause death. The lyrical subject of both songs invokes God’s promise that He shall not leave his people if they show remorse and beg for His forgiveness. Once again, Poles are presented as a chosen people, faithful to God, particularly loved by the Maker (“Where else are You and Your divine hand praised more?”). Such motifs may be treated as evidence that the ideas of traditional Polish gentry permeated into the 17th-century religious lyrics. Thus, a suggestion appears that God should rather bring his wrath on heretics and heathens, who corrupt Catholics. The search for a scapegoat is hardly original in the pieces about plagues. Though no such reference is made in Bartoszewski’s work, the outbreak of a plague often increased anti-Semitic sentiments.⁷²

In the Old Polish period, it was widely believed that the direct cause of epidemics was spoilt air (i.e. poisonous mists and fumes, so-called miasmas,⁷³ or “venomous elements,” as Bartoszewski writes in song 16). Anti-plague pamphlets, herbals and medical treatises recommended airing the rooms, fumigating and incensing them with burnt herbs that were

⁷² J. Kracik, *Pokonać czarną śmierć...*, p. 54.

⁷³ A. Karpiński, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

ascribed disinfecting properties.⁷⁴ Such fumes were supposedly brought forth by celestial bodies. Anyway, when the threat of pestilence was around, any unexpected changes in nature could herald the upcoming plague. Thus, the vault of heaven was analysed to forecast danger – the most ominous portent was the appearance of a comet, as well as a solar or lunar eclipse.⁷⁵ Earthquakes, animal plagues or locust swarming⁷⁶ were also considered as omens of the plague, as well as floods, mists and heavy rains:⁷⁷

Jeśliś łaskawy, gwiazdy mi śmierciosprawne zgoła
Ni zarażone jadem zaszkoźdzą żywioła

(From the 4th song).

[Show Your grace, or else the stars, death-bringing and infected with venom, will cease my life.]

Zajadowione przeczyszć podmiesięczne
Żywioły a daj powietrze już wdzięczne

(From the 6th song).

[Cleanse the venomous sublunary elements, and give us eventually healthy air.]

Hostile and unapproachable, nature conspires against man, as weather phenomena (storm, rain, hail, drought or frost) are signs of God's wrath and vengeance. In the *Bezoar* collection, God appears as a merciful Father protecting His children, so one should believe in His pity, but on the other hand – as strongly stressed by the author – He is a stern Judge, from whom man would readily escape, were it not impossible to hide from the Creator who is infinite, omniscient and omnipotent. The poet points to the attributes of God: justice and mercy, but also impetuosity, wrathfulness, vindictiveness and irascibility. This is a vision of the punishing awe-inspiring Lord, whose attribute is a double-edged sword (in the fifth song). The anthropomorphization of God is evident here. All man can do is to beg “just God” to be “mercifully unjust,” as observed by Jan Błoński when commenting on God the Judge depicted in the poems by Mikołaj Sęp-Szarzyński.⁷⁸ In *Bezoar*, one can read:

Ani postępuj z nami według naszej winy,
Boś nasz Dobrodziej i Pan, Pan wszelkiej krainy

(From the 5th song).

[Do not deal with us according to our guilt, as You are our Benefactor and Lord, the Lord of all realms.]

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 169; J. Kracik, *Pokonać czarną śmierć...*, p. 27.

⁷⁵ S. Namaczyńska, op. cit., pp. 33, 39, 79; J. Kracik, *Chrześcijaństwo kontra magia...*, p. 98; idem, *Pokonać czarną śmierć...*, pp. 18–19; A. Karpiński, op. cit., pp. 52–54.

⁷⁶ S. Namaczyńska, op. cit., p. 78.

⁷⁷ J. Kracik, *Pokonać czarną śmierć...*, p. 24.

⁷⁸ J. Błoński, *Mikołaj Sęp Szarzyński a początki polskiego baroku*, Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych “Universitas,” 2001, p. 125.

Wprawdzie w swych wszystkich jesteś drogach sprawiedliwym,
Aleś w sprawach swych wszystkich dziwnie litościwym
(From the 16th song).

[You are just in all Your ways indeed, but curiously merciful are Your decrees.]

Besides the stern Father and Judge, there is also Christ the Comforter – humble, full of love and sacrifice, “the source of life” or “the source of eternal glory,” who should be imitated and whose passion brings redemption. God’s Son is a symbol of hope and recovery: *Christus Medicus* heals with the power of the Holy Cross.

In religious lyrics, the angel of death, who releases arrows piercing the sinners suddenly and without warning, is often presented as God’s envoy and executor of divine decrees and sentences on the earth. God, as a transcendental being, needs an intermediary – that is why He sends the avenging angel to earth.⁷⁹ Such depictions were especially potent in old-time iconography.⁸⁰ This angelological motif of biblical origin (mainly found in the Apocalypse of John)⁸¹ appears also in Bartoszewski’s work:

A chciej pojrzeć na sprawę anioła swego,
Który stadem lud zganiania do snu wiecznego.
[...]
Wspomni na swój testament a mów mściwemu
Aniołowi na powal lud bijącemu,
Mów: „Już natenczas dosyć, zahamuj rękę”
(From the 9th song).

[Please, look at Your angel, who drives herds of people into eternal sleep [...]. Remember Your testament and tell the avenging angel who fells people to the ground: “It is enough now, stay your hand.”]

The lyrical subject of the seventeenth song, *Czasu tego w utrapieniu* [In This Time of Sorrow], accepts God’s will and is aware of his own sins – he even states that the punishment is too lenient, given the gravity of the sins: “Graver are my sins than Your ferocity, The arrows of Thy anger smack of pity.” In the spirit of the vanity of man’s condition, the sinful and terrified man (called “a lump of clay” in God’s hands, “an autumn leaf,” “a reaped sheaf”) hopes that his earthly suffering will turn into “eternal bliss.” He argues that the dead will not enhance God’s glory, while the survivors will extol His name. In the eighteenth song – *W utrapieniu* [In Sorrow] – the plague is compared to the suffering on the cross. The sinner begs God for faith, hope and love, which will help him carry his burden. Receiving a punishment is the way to become cleansed of sin: he believes that God

⁷⁹ F.M. Rosiński, “Aniołowie w Nowym Testamencie,” in: *Anioł w literaturze i kulturze*, Vol. 2, edited by J. Ługowska, Wrocław: Oficyna Wydawnicza Atut – Wrocławskie Wydawnictwo Oświatowe, 2005, pp. 13, 16.

⁸⁰ A. Karpiński, op. cit., p. 35.

⁸¹ F.M. Rosiński, op. cit., pp. 30–32.

[Mother of God, our great Helper, Refuge and Advocate, wrap this town and all of us, on all sides, with the mantle of Your protection.]

The collective lyrical subject of many Marian songs by the Jesuit in Vilnius entreats Our Lady to face her Son and ask Him for mercy on behalf of the sinners. As Roman Mazurkiewicz claims, “the topos of the Virgin Mary’s divine maternity proves so potent and capacious that it moulds the relation between Her and Christ also with respect to the heavenly reality, where – from a theological point of view – She must hold a lower hierarchical position than God, her Son.”⁸⁴ In Bartoszewski’s poetry, the idea of Mary’s intercession is based on the conviction that she can touch and move her Son, inspire His mercy. The lyrical subject refers to Our Lady’s motherly sensitivity and Her influence on Christ’s decisions:

Ukaż piersi, któremiś go karmiła
I któremiś płaczącego tuliła,
Co ujrawszy, snadnie się pohamuje
I nad naszą krewkością się zmiłuje.
Zmiłuje się, Matko, Syn twój jedyny,
Częste bacząc za nami twe przyczyny,
Nieprzyjacieli i plągi zaostrzone
Będą wszystkie na wieki przytępione

(From the 20th song).

[Show Him the bosom that suckled Him in His infancy and eased His tears. Seeing it, He will soon restrain Himself and take pity on our hot-headedness. Your only Son will show us mercy, our Mother, heeding your frequent requests, and the enemy’s sharp plagues will be blunted forever.]

The sinner assumes that the Son will not refuse His Mother’s request. He implores not only Our Lady, but also Christ – arguing that His grace will make His mother happy. As in almost all the *Bezoar* songs, a promise is found here that God’s and Our Lady’s grace will be extolled in return for saving one’s life. The lyrical subject stresses the role of Our Lady in the heavenly hierarchy, calling her “the Empress of the heavenly court” and “the Lady of the choir of angels,” who is “loved by the Lord.”

Już niech będzie twej Matki wzdychanie
Za nami przyjemne, Panie,
Niech jej prośba twoje święte uszy
Ku zmiłowaniu poruszy,
Abyś ku nam się pośpieszył
A Matuchnę swoją w tym pocieszył,
Żechmy ciebie uprosili
I litości twej dostąpili

(From the 21st song).

⁸⁴ R. Mazurkiewicz, *Deesis. Idea wstawiennictwa Bogarodzicy i św. Jana Chrzciciela w kulturze średniowiecznej*, Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych “Universitas,” 2012, p. 257.

[May your Mother's sighs appeal to your holy ears, our Lord, and inspire your pity to give us succour. Thus, You will comfort your sweet Mother, who will know that You have listened to our pleading and shown us your mercy.]

Nadziejo chrześcijańska,
Oblubienico Pańska,
Któraś jest posadzona tuż przy Pańskim tronie
W nieskazitelnej szacie, z gwiazd w witej koronie
(From the 22nd song).

[Hope of the Christians, loved by the Lord, seated close to the Lord's throne, arrayed in an immaculate robe, with a crown woven of the stars on Her head.]

Also, the author makes use of celestial metaphors, so frequent in Marian literature: in his paraphrase of the Latin song *Stella caeli extirpavit*, the lyrical subject calls the Virgin Mary "Celestial Star" and "Star of the Sea." Believing that Our Lady rules the stars and other celestial bodies (i.e. the direct causes of plagues), sinners invoke not only Her intercession, but also direct assistance:

Gwiazda niebieska, która piastowała
Chrystusa Pana, z korzenia wyrwała
Śmierć jadowitą, szczep on nieszczęśliwy
Adama, światu wszytkiemu szkodliwy.
Niechże ta Gwiazda raczy z swej miłości
Gwiazdy uśmierzyć, które bez litości,
Jak kupą wojska ludzi zabijają
I strasznej śmierci wrzodem zarażają
(From the 23rd song).

[The celestial Star that looked after our Lord Christ has uprooted venomous death, the legacy of Adam, harmful to the whole world. May that Star, by Her grace, deign to appease the stars that slay people just as armies do, with no mercy, infecting them with the ulcers of terrible death.]

As pointed out before, the faith in God's justice did not mean that man should forget medicine. The lyrical part of *Bezoar*, i.e. "a prescription for the soul," is complemented with a supplement (referred to in the title page), a short preventive-therapeutic guide: *Nauka przeciwko morowemu powietrzu doświadczona i od wielu sławnych doktorów spisana* [Proven Knowledge Against the Plague, Compiled from Many Famous Doctors]. Although medical and pharmacological vocabulary penetrates into the songs, *Bezoar* achieves its full dimension of "a work healing the soul and the body" only when both its parts are considered. In Bartoszewski's work, medicine and religion are interrelated and intertwined. Faith is presented as a panacea for plagues but, on the other hand, the apothecaries' vocabulary is used in religious contexts. This illustrates the blurred line between medical knowledge and religion.

The title suggests that the author refers to medical treatises, but the content show that it was actually based on well-known and uncomplicated

methods of plague treatment and prevention. Such simple, hardly original, recommendations were available to a wide reading public from the popular anti-plague pamphlets and other “how-to” publications. The “Proven Knowledge Against the Plague” comprises the advice on how to behave in various situations related to the reality of an epidemic, e.g. what measures should be used at home and what outside, how to prepare oneself for leaving home and what precautions to take while staying in a plague-stricken place.

Notably, Bartoszewski begins his “instruction” as follows: “Everyone should first invoke God’s forgiveness of their sins and receive the holy sacraments, and then fumigate the home, with windows and doors closed.” Thus, prayers should precede practical activities, such as fumigating or incensing one’s living quarters. Disinfecting the air with fire and smoke was one of the most popular methods of the daily fight against the epidemic that hit a town.⁸⁵ Fumigating with incense or aromatic smoke was recommended. The author lists the herbs having the power to purify the air: juniper, wormwood, rue, oak leaves, etc. Fumigation is evocative of the ancient pagan rituals performed in places deemed dangerous to human life. In particular, unpleasant heavy smells are shunned, which “create damp, putrefaction and evil poisonous fevers in people, thus causing a plague.” That is why the municipal sanitary staff had to tidy the gutters and remove manure or mud particularly neatly.

The guidebook closes with *Insze recepty dla ludzi subtelných* [Other Prescriptions for the Frail] and *Lekarstwa dla ludzi prostych* [Medicine for Common People], which recapitulate the popular treatment methods (mainly herbal therapies) and list the general dietary principles to follow during the plague.

Moving on to the conclusion, it must be noted that Bartoszewski’s *Bezoar* is mainly a collection of religious poems. Their lyrical subject (often a collective one) implores God, the Virgin Mary or the saints to avert the plague, interpreted as a punishment for sins. Aware of their sinfulness, people entreat God to grant their requests, simultaneously declaring their humility and complete acceptance of His decrees. The hero replies to God’s wrath and tries to lessen the punishment telling Him of his suffering and pain. In this context, *Bezoar* has a predominantly therapeutic and consolatory function.

Yet, Bartoszewski’s songs are also a record of the mentality and religiousness of the people facing the risk of death in the early 17th century. His poems were written for simple readers, not versed in theological interpretations or biblical senses, as this is the profile of the Catholics to be found in his work. Most importantly, their faith is based on a simplified pragmatized vision of Catholicism as a religious system “marked by the continual examination of faults and merits, sin and penance.”⁸⁶ The stern Judge has pronounced

⁸⁵ J. Kracik, *Pokonać czarną śmierć...*, pp. 26, 79.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

his verdict on his disobedient people – disease results from sin. The lyrical subject expresses regret and begs for the plague to be stopped but, on the other hand, he negotiates with the Maker, offering something in return, e.g. the prospects of praising His mercy in songs.

Bartoszewski's lyrics are approachable, both linguistically and intellectually. Void of any references to classical traditions or humanist poetry, they use biblical motifs to confirm certain thoughts of the author, rather than analyse the Holy Scriptures. The emphasis on the insignificance and frailty of man, who is but "an autumn leaf" fighting against the storm that is tossing it, and the vision of death as an unbridled force overwhelming the world, reaping many lives at once, constitute evident references to the Mediaeval visions of man and death. These songs are thus an example of a lecture in the spirit of *vanitas*, intended for the man torn between the fascination with the deceptive "vanities" of earthly life and the pursuit of the sacred, associated with Christ's suffering on the cross.

Finally, *Bezoar* is sort of "a prescription for healing the soul and the body," as stressed in the title of this article. Thus, it combines a vision of common man's religiousness with that of his daily life during an epidemic, of the social conditions and hardships that all the dwellers of a plague-stricken town had to face, their fears and anxieties. The author points to the mental condition of the hero of his songs: the fear of one's neighbours, which brings distrust, suspicion, rejection and solitude. Emphasized is the despair of parting with the dying loved ones, who cannot be even given a family funeral.

Translated by Piotr Cymbalista

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