



Ewelina Drzewiecka

Institute of Slavic Studies
Polish Academy of Sciences

In the Trap of Agnosticism: Judas according to Emiliyan Stanev

Аз винаги съм сам със себе си
и именно аз съм мъчител на себе си
(Станев, 1998, p. 80)¹

Emiliyan Stanev is regarded as a very talented Bulgarian writer, who raises most difficult existential questions for the sake of the future of humanity and the Bulgarian people. He published the short story entitled “Лазар и Исус” (“Lazarus and Jesus”) in 1977, and it is considered to be one of his very latest works. This Evangelical paraphrase is highly personal in tone, and as such it has a special status in the author’s oeuvre. It is the only text of its

¹ *I am always alone and I am tormenting myself.*

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kind in Stanev's literary output, and the only one to focus on Jesus.² The story is of special interest to Stanev scholars because it adds to our understanding of the author's worldview (and a full understanding of Stanev's beliefs has been elusive for decades, as he is seen as both a believer and a skeptic, gnostic, and even nihilist.³) Stanev's close connections with the highest echelons of the Communist party are well documented, and in this context the analysis of "Lazarus and Jesus" is all the more compelling.⁴ It seems that the story can offer insight not only into Stanev's views on the Christian tradition, but also on religion as such – or more specifically, into Stanev's views as to the place of religion under the Communist regime.

Stanev's references to God and religion in his diary are usually ambiguous. He states his belief that Jesus Christ was a very important figure in the history of human civilization; while he also muses "no one can say for certain who this man was" (Станева, 1979, p. 62). Stanev remarks that Jesus's portrayal in the Gospels is incomplete, because his contemporaries were not able to collect and write down all their reminiscences of him, and could not accurately describe his teachings (Станева, 1979, p. 62). Stanev's suggestion that Jesus's parables were not the only – and, more importantly – not **the most crucial** component of his teaching evokes two widely disparate schools of thought. On the one hand, it refers to the apocryphal (Gnostic) tradition that implies that **the essence** of his teaching is outside the canon. On the other hand, it harkens back to the naturalist and rationalist critique of Christianity that emerged during the Enlightenment and claimed that the Gospels constitute a historic text of doubtful accuracy and authenticity. Stanev's attitude to institutional religion reveals his interest in the beginnings of orthodoxy. According to Radka Pencheva (Пенчева, 2011, pp. 23–24), Stanev shared the belief of Ernest Renan that history requires continual interpretative engagement.

The connection with Renan seems all the more significant because the controversial historian's main claim to fame is the vigorous rebuttal of the super-

² The reminiscences of Nadezhda Stanev shed some more light on the story's composition. According to her, Stanev contemplated writing a story about Jesus as early as in 1942 and in 1974 he used the manuscript for this unfinished work in the process of composition of "Тихик и Назарий" ("Tikhik and Nazarius") (Станева, 1979, p. 335).

³ See Радев (1999, pp. 235–237); Кулева (1997); Димитров (2007); Иванова (2007); Грудков (2010).

⁴ This article offers an in-depth analysis of Stanev's short story (Cf. Drzewiecka, 2016, pp. 217–253). A shorter analysis can be found in: Drzewiecka (2013, 2014). Cf. Джебъецка (2008).

natural origins of Christianity and an attempt to “de-mystify” Christianity using the scientific method. It is therefore highly significant that Stanev had in his library a Russian translation of *Les Apôtres (The Apostles)*. An analysis of markings and underlinings in his copy suggests that he was fascinated with the idea of resurrection.⁵ Renan himself believed that the resurrection was an illusion, something that people **wanted** to believe because it offered them a compelling vision of a spiritual metamorphosis. It was supposed to be “a triumph of idea over reality.” It is telling that Stanev underlined the following passage in his copy of Renan: “Если мудрость не в силах утешить несчастный род человеческий, обманутый судьбой, то пусть попытается это сделать безумие” (Ренан, 1907, p. 43; Пенчева, 2011, p. 29).⁶ We can therefore conclude that Stanev was drawn to the belief that human propensity for autosuggestion is at the fount of all religions and secular revolutions.

In this context, it is all the more telling that, nearing the end of his life, Stanev decided to work on a paraphrase of biblical material. It has to be remembered that he lived and worked under the Communist regime, and this context decidedly adds poignancy to his decision. Stanev’s portrayal of Judas as the traitor of Jesus is especially telling in this context. It seems that, just as it is the case with Stanev’s other works, the historic trappings (i.e. the setting, based on the Bible as a historical text) are only a departure point for the portrayal of

⁵ One should remember that Renan’s starting point were the differences between the Gospels in the description of the morning of resurrection. It should be stressed that in his vision, the women’s yearning and propensity for affectation play a crucial role in the story of resurrection. Additionally, human gullibility and intellectual limitations make it possible for the resurrection story to prosper. For Renan, the ecclesiastical history is closely linked to demagoguery and to further distortions of the historical truth, and the official doctrine is based on misappropriation. It should also be stressed that Renan’s main objection against Christianity is its purported nihilism, i.e. the demand to turn one’s back on the world because it is the dominion of Satan, a rejection of the temporal power, and limiting one’s creative instinct. In Renan’s view, the latter development paved the way for Gnostic heresies. In this context, it is worth reminding that Stanev had a negative view on the role of Byzantium in Bulgarian history, because he objected to the model of religious and secular power represented by the Empire, and to heterodox movements that stemmed from it. He blamed Bulgarian failures precisely on nihilistic and dualistic heresies. For this reason, he believed that the choice of the Orthodox Church over Catholicism was a disaster for Bulgaria. Cf. Сарандев (2007, pp. 127–128); Станев, (1998, pp. 85–86, 121).

⁶ “If wisdom refuses to console this poor human race, betrayed by fate, let folly attempt the enterprise.” (Renan, 1866, p. 62).

modernity, and of the struggles of the secularized world in the second half of the twentieth century. “Lazarus and Jesus” was written in a specific historical context, when communication with the readers could not be fully open and the choice of biblical motifs could activate the potential for allusive and opaque Aesopian language. For this reason, he granted his short story the status of a supposed biblical apocryphon. “Lazarus and Jesus” refers to the canonical corpus of Christian texts, but its message goes beyond the Christian tradition and is closely linked to the author’s own beliefs.⁷ As Rumiana Joveva, the author of the story’s first critical analysis, aptly remarks, the text’s ideological potential makes “Lazarus and Jesus” a “masterpiece of philosophical and artistic synthesis” (or a “synthesis-like novel”) that spells its **ambiguous** message through a juxtaposition of ideas (Йовева, 1981, pp. 194–197).

Despite its unusual status, the story remains outside the canon not only of Bulgarian literature, but also of the Stanev’s work in general. Its critical reception is still relatively small, which has an explanation regarding the communist period,⁸ but in case of the time after 1989 it is surprising. Although the interest in Stanev’s legacy is constantly increasing,⁹ the literature on “Lazarus and Jesus” is still unsatisfying (See Пенчева, 2002; Ефендулов, 2005; Герова, 2007; Георгиева, 2007, 2008; Василев, 2008, 2011; Сивриев, 2011; Владева, 2015). Importantly, many recent interpretations pretending to be critical make the story a starting point for a discussion on secondary topics,

⁷ The philosophical and existential problems are especially visible in his late work, when he tended to focus on the experience of lost unity (Димитров, 2007). This tenet proved crucial for Stanev’s spiritual autobiography. One should add that it is *The Antichrist* that is supposed to be Stanev’s most autobiographical work. The novel talks about the tragic conflict between irrational faith and sceptical reason, and its central character is a modern day *homo duplex* (Сугарев, 1987). Stanev’s diary is also a testament to his engagement with the “cursed” questions about the existence in the context of the existential rift in human nature.

⁸ It should be noted, however, that the interpretations created during this period still remain important. See Йовева (1981, pp. 194–197); Каролев (1982, pp. 161–188).

⁹ See Бучков (1996); *Емилиян Станев – личност и творческа съдба* (1997); *Емилиян Станев: Юбилеен вестник по повод 90 години от рождението* (1997); Пенчева (2003); *Спомени* (2007); *Емилиян Станев и безкрайните ловни полета на литературата* (2008); Радев (2010); Пенчева (2011). Most of them are apologetic memoir or comparative. Still, the main focus of research seems to be the source of Stanev’s inspiration and his relationships with other writers. A kind of culmination of archival approach is a work of Radka Pencheva (2003, 2011), who often falls into the trap of anachronism, builds hasty conclusions without deeper analysis of his artistic legacy.

as the interpretative contexts and thesis are not justified by the text, and in fact evoke the researcher's worldview.¹⁰

"Lazarus and Jesus" is an idiosyncratic paraphrase of the Bible story of Lazarus's restoration to life – an important episode in the "holy story" that is however mentioned in only one Gospel (John 11:1–53). Stanev's story can be called an apocryphon because it refers directly to the biblical canon. The story's subtitle, "An Apocryphon," was apparently added by the editor (Герова, 2007, p. 274), but there is little doubt that the text was meant as an apocryphon by the writer. Proof of his intentions can be found in the closing sentence: "Това е историята на възкресения Лазар, за която евангелието мълчи" (Станев, 1981, p. 392).¹¹ The story's last sentence testifies to Stanev's belief that the biblical canon is incomplete (and/or inaccurate.) By suggesting that the Evangelist omitted this tale from his record, Stanev discredits him and questions his **version** of the events, but also at the same time implies that his own rendering of the story is a true (albeit, literary) account. Lazarus's inner metamorphosis (caused by Jesus's agency) splits the story into two parts: before and after the resurrection. Stanev's polemical intent is visible already in the story's title that reverses the customary order. The story's first pre-resurrection part is in accordance with the source narrative. The second part adds new plot elements, showing the consequences of the "miracle" in a way that is similar to ancient apocrypha. But Stanev goes further than that, suggesting, in sharp opposition to the orthodox version, that Lazarus's resurrection was **false**. As a result, the story can be classed as an anti-canonical apocryphon. The character who tries to solve the mystery of the false prophet is his future traitor, Judas. Despite the fact that he is seemingly only a minor character, and his name is absent from the title, in truth, Judas plays a key role as a debunker of Christ's teachings.

The story's plot incorporates both the Bible story of Lazarus who was raised from the dead by Jesus (John 11:1–53), but also that of his namesake, Lazarus the beggar (Luke 16:19–31). Both strands are brought together by the motif of **trust** (John 11:25.40; Luke 16:31) that also seems crucial for the character of

¹⁰ Some researchers make the mistake of anachronism, but also bring to a common denominator completely different texts, without serious justification in Stanev's work, making reference not to the official interpretation of the evangelical episode, but to its heterodox reading. See Василев (2008); Пенчева (2002).

¹¹ *Such is the story of Lazarus's resurrection, of which there is no word in the Gospels.*

Judas. In Stanev's version, Judas belongs to Jesus's inner circle, even though the latter knows that Judas is skeptical about his teaching. Judas is portrayed as clever and cunning, and for this reason he is responsible for the group's money. His epistemological stance is strongly connected to the principle of rational choice (of faith). Judas the Apostle does not believe in miracles, but he **wants** to believe, i.e. to find the answers he craves. For this reason, he is looking for a rational explanation of Jesus's activities. In essence, wants to rationally prove – or debunk – Jesus's holy status. The miracle of resurrection seems to him an excellent opportunity to **check** whether the Kingdom of God really exists.

Judas's failure is not only a result of Lazarus's stubborn silence after his resurrection. Lazarus is transformed, but Jesus sadly states: "Днес нашият брат Лазар загуби царството небесно" (Станев, 1981, р. 382).¹² When Judas asks him how this is possible if Lazarus claims that he **has seen** the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus replies: "Царството небесно е у всекиго, но не всеки го вижда в себе си, защото то е като имане, закопано в нива, която стопанът ѝ оре. Но човешкият разсъдък е наклонен да го отрича, понеже го гнети и ограничава свободата му" (Станев, 1981, р. 382).¹³ The same words return, slightly rephrased, in Stanev's diary in an entry dated 27 November 1978: "Царството на духа е у всекиго, но не всеки го вижда у себе си, защото то е като имане, закопано в нива, която стопанинът оре. Но човешкият разсъдък е наклонен да го отрича, понеже го гнети и ограничава свободата му" (Станев, 1981, р. 132).¹⁴

¹² *Today our brother Lazarus has lost the Kingdom of Heaven.*

¹³ *The Kingdom of Heaven is in every one of us, but not everyone sees it, because it is like a treasure hidden in a field that a farmer ploughs. But the human reason prefers to reject it, because it gnaws on it and limits its freedom.*

¹⁴ *The kingdom of the spirit is in every one of us, but not everyone sees it, because it is like a treasure, hidden in a field that a farmer ploughs. But the human reason prefers to reject it, because it gnaws on it and limits its freedom.* It is worth noting that, according to his wife's testimony, in the early 1974 Stanev was reading the New Testament with great attention. He commented on a passage that reads: "И като видели, че Исус прави чудеса, казали му да напусне страната" (*And then they saw that Jesus makes miracles, and told him to leave the country*) referring to the human dread of the spiritual reality: "Виждаш ли как човекът не смее да надникне в душата си? Бои се от царството на духа. На стари години започнах да разбирам някой работи" (Станева, 1979, pp. 333–334) (*Can you see how a man is afraid to look inside his own soul? He is afraid of the kingdom of the spirit. Once I grew old, I started to understand certain things.*) One should stress that the passage quoted above is absent from the Bulgarian translation of the New Testament and appears to be a paraphrase of Mark 5:1–20.

Stanev's musings refer to the Biblical parable of the hidden treasure (Matthew 13:44) and the difficulty with finding the Kingdom of Heaven refer to another parable: that in which it is compared to the infinitesimal mustard seed (Matthew 13:31–32, Mark 4:30–32, Luke 13:18–19). This opposition of alive vs. dead, which is highly characteristic of language in the Bible, also brings to mind the Biblical scene where Jesus discusses resurrection with the Sadducees (Luke 20:38). Stanev's negative attitude to reason brings to mind the statement, often repeated in the Gospels, that no one was able to fully comprehend the actions of the Son of God.

The story finds its climax in a conversation between Judas and Lazarus, after Christ's crucifixion. Both characters have undergone considerable metamorphoses. The former has lost his status as a trusted disciple and became a traitor, hunted by many; the latter has changed from "a feeble-minded man" into a cunning businessman.¹⁵ Crucially, the price of Lazarus's prosperity seems to be his full cooperation with the Jewish elite. It requires Lazarus to repeatedly deny Jesus. In fact, Lazarus has to deny his own resurrection. Judas wants to talk to him and he hopes that they will be able to understand one another because of their shared fate.¹⁶ However, the only argument that Lazarus now understands is money. It is only the offer of money that will make him consider meeting with a "cursed" man. Looking for profit, he agrees to sell Judas a **barren** piece of land in return for Jesus's robe and thirty pieces of silver.¹⁷

¹⁵ He turns in fact into a version of the rich man from the parable of Lazarus the beggar.

¹⁶ Judas says: "Научих че си свидетелствувал против него и така си придобил тоя дюкян... Затова пази се и ти! Тези пари получих от Кайяфа, Ана и Александър, първосвещеници на Ерусалим, срещу кръвта му и те трябва да влязат в твоите ръце, понеже имаме еднаква съдба. Изглеждаш добре, но няма ли червей в сърцето ти?" (Станев, 1981, p. 390) (*I have heard that you gave testimony against him, and now you own a shop. But beware! The silver that I have got from Caiaphas, Annas and Alexander, the highest priests in all of Jerusalem, is blood money and now it should go into your hands because our fates are the same. You look healthy, but is there no worm eating away your heart?*)

¹⁷ In the story, Jesus's robe is a gift from Maria and Martha (a thank you gift for *saving* their brother!), but the fact that it is a seamless robe (and therefore it was not divided between the guards at Golgotha) is an oblique allusion to the Biblical text (John 19:23–24). But in contrast with the Biblical narrative, in Stanev's story the guards do not cast lots for it (cf. Psalm 22:18). The circumstances of Jesus's death refer to Matthew 27:3–5, where the traitor, "upon coming to his senses" after hearing Jesus's death sentence, gives the money back to the high priests who are responsible for Jesus's death, and they in turn use it to build a cemetery for foreigners (and thus, from the Jewish point of view, for the **impure**.)

The scene is based on a compilation of several references from the Bible and it underscores the characters' essential kinship. Judas plans to commit a suicide on the plot of land he buys off Lazarus.¹⁸ His purchase of land is imbued with additional symbolism once we remember the parable of the treasure hidden in a field. The traitor takes possession of a barren plot of land, where nothing will ever grow. He will not be able to find the Kingdom of God in his field. Likewise, the fact that Lazarus acquires the objects associated with Christ's passion (the robe and the pieces of silver) makes him symbolically a traitor.

Viewed in this context, the juxtaposition of the two traitors' motivations for their betrayals reveals important differences. Initially, Judas admits to Lazarus (with some measure of pride as it seems) that he indeed betrayed Jesus to the authorities. He claims that he was motivated by pity. He compares Jesus to Lazarus and draws a parallel between them. For Judas, both Lazarus and Jesus are "feeble-minded" and their weakness triggers the same emotions. But Lazarus's speech introduces an element of ambiguity into his explanation. He suggests that it is Jesus's fault that they **both** have lost their freedom and lightheartedness.

Спомняш ли си как ти изглеждаше този свят, когато ти беше недоразвит и слабоумен? Ти си го виждал, както го виждат децата, и сърцето ти е било безгрижно и свободно. Знам го от моето детство и знам, че си мислил за това. А когато той ме изкуши с царството небесно и аз тръгнах подире му, престанах да бъда весел и свободен. Душата ми се измъчи, защото отне свободата ѝ, като я подмами и задължи с великото си безумие, с което ще тиранствува над човека. Тебе приспа, но не успя да приспи моя ум. Обаче нарани душата ми и смути здравния ми разсъдък... (Станев, 1981, р. 390).¹⁹

¹⁸ The circumstances of Judas's death in Stanev's story suggest that he compiled the two descriptions of the death present in the New Testament (Matthew 27:5, Apostles 1:18). As Pencheva (Пенчева, 2011, p. 13) demonstrates in her study of Stanev's copy of Renan's *Les Apôtres*, in his research of the origins of Christianity Stanev became interested in the circumstances surrounding the creation of the *legend* of Judas's death. Pencheva interprets the fact that Stanev underlined a passage discussing the traitor's purchase of land (where he was subsequently supposed to live for many years in isolation and obscurity) as a proof of his doubts regarding the "orthodox version" of suicide. Regrettably, Pencheva's conclusions seem perhaps somewhat far-fetched.

¹⁹ *Do you remember what the world seemed like to you when you were a feeble-minded fool? You saw it then just like children do, and your heart was light and carefree. I remember that feeling from my own childhood, and I know that you have thought about it too. But when Jesus lured me with his talk of the Kingdom of Heaven and I followed him, I lost my freedom and joy. And my soul was tormented, for he imprisoned it and cheated it in his boundless madness.*

In the passage above, Judas yearns after the blessed state of childhood, with its freedom (from existential questions.) He states that his carefree existence changed into torment because of Jesus, purportedly because Judas fell into the trap of irrational (religious) doctrine. The actions of the pseudo-prophet (in the case of Judas – his selection as a disciple, and in the case of Lazarus – his restoration to life) brought about only negative change.

Accepting Jesus’s perspective does not bring about the desired spiritual change. The experience of Mystery is pointless in the case of Judas (and ultimately also in the case of Lazarus.) It does not bring transformation, but it brings suffering instead. Such a vision is in accordance with Christian thinking regarding non-believers (Rom. 1:21–22). The Biblical metaphor of madness (folly) turns out to be crucial because it reveals the paradox of faith (1 Cor. 1:25). It seems that Judas is going to share the fate of those who had hardened their hearts (Eph. 4:18). A similar message is evoked by the image of blindness as the cause of the tragic closing of oneself against God’s light (2 Peter 1:8–9). Stanev’s Jesus warns:

Никой не може да види отца, защото не ще го познае. Но всеки вижда света, който е създал, и всяко човешко сърце го носи в себе си със светлината, без която не биха били зрящи очите. Светилникът в душата е негов и това не ви ли стига да повярвате? И който е видял мене, видял е и Отца (Станев, 1981, р. 381; cf. John 8,12).²⁰

The **loss** of vision can be connected to closing one’s eyes (in sleep or in death) and also corresponds with Jesus’s explanation that Lazarus **lost** the Kingdom of God because he was (and/or is) dead. It also harks back to Judas’s speech and refers to his faulty understanding of the place of reason within faith.

On the other hand, the suggestion that only the “feeble-minded” are capable of believing in God and seeing the Kingdom of Heaven denigrates the role of reason and is at odds with Christian orthodoxy, which highlights the increase of man’s spiritual powers under the influence of God’s grace.

And by the power of his madness he will take dominion over man. He put you to sleep, and even though he failed to put my mind to sleep, he still wounded my heart and addled my brain...

²⁰ *No man can look at the Father, because he shall not know him. But all those who look at the world created by Him, carry Him in their hearts together with the light. Without this light, your eyes would not see. Is not this light in the soul, bestowed by Him, enough to make you believe? Whoever has known me, also knows my Father in heaven. Confer 1 Corinthians 1:18–25 and Izaiah 29:14. Confer also the early Christian motto: *Credo, quia absurdum*.*

A reductionist, ultramystical²¹ approach would bar the road to *sacrum* for a rational man, because his reason would always reject the Mystery. The image of the Unknowable also refers to the concept of *deus absconditus*, the remote and hidden God, who can however be known (found) by indirect means, through his creation, and thanks to the “light” contained in the human soul.²² In this paradigm, the religious experience is devoid of the element of “personal meeting with God” which is highlighted by Christianity. The irrationality of the experience proves problematic even for Lazarus the mystic, who fears the Unknown/Unknowable until the very end. Additionally, Jesus expressly claims that the expression “fool” is not applicable, because of the unique role of spiritual sensitivity: “Детето в него живее редом с мъжа до дълбока старост и духът е в детето, което познава царството небесно...” (Станев, 1981, p. 379).²³

The figure of a child evoked in this passage is of crucial significance. On the one hand, it symbolizes the Biblical figure of the blessed man (Matthew 5:1–16), and on the other hand, it harkens back to the powerful metaphor of aging that stands for spiritual growth. Within this paradigm, the symbol of the child is deeply ambiguous – which adds to the overall ambiguity of the entire text. The child can be a positive symbol – as such, the image of the child is closely linked to that of God as a (caring) father (Matthew 6:9–13). On the other hand, it also refers to the image of Enlightenment understood as leaving behind childhood, a period of “self-inflicted infancy,”²⁴ i.e. lack of

²¹ It seems that this approach is typical for Eastern Christianity (the Orthodox Church), which is historically associated with mysticism and the apophatic experience of God.

²² The concept of remote God links on the one hand with the Christian apophatic tradition and on the other – it is close to the agnostic approach, because it relates to the Enlightenment theist model. The imagery of light as a rhetorical trope is in accordance both with the tradition of Bible metaphors and with the Gnostic dualist worldview.

²³ *There is a child in the man, alive alongside him, and the spirit resides in the child who has known the kingdom of heaven.*

²⁴ It is worth pointing out that Stanev not only read Kant, but also agreed with his concept of transcendental ideas. Cf. Stanev’s diary entry of 29 November 1976: „Чета Кант и съм поразен от факта, че мнозина, особено между марксистите, мислят без трансцендентални идеи – за бога, душата, света и пр. А без тях как изобщо човек може да мисли? – Да се мисли само за икономиката, производството, класовата борба?... Но от мислене с трансцендентални идеи управниците се плашат и винаги са се плашили...” (Станев, 1998, p. 107). (*I read Kant and I am floored by the fact that many, especially among the Marxists, think without making use of transcendental ideas – God, the soul, the world etc. And how can*

independence in one's thinking that is expressed in one's need for such religious constructs as religious doctrine and belief in transcendence.²⁵ Within the modern paradigm, the goal of every human is intellectual independence and full autonomy of Reason, which is only possible in a world cleansed of magical thinking. Viewed from this perspective, childhood must be seen as a negative symbol. In "Lazarus and Jesus" the figures of the child and the fool merge, and thus their value is ambiguous. From the point of view of modern maturity, the figure represents someone who is not ruled by reason (i.e. the fool.) It stands therefore for irrationality and for lack of any limitations or constraints. Stanev's Judas realises that there is a deep chasm between the positions of the adult (i.e. the modern man, who prides himself on his skeptical attitude) and the child (i.e. someone who trusts God fully). Judas himself belongs to the first category. The essence of his tragedy lies in Judas's inability to ascertain whether **the Other** is a blessed man or a fool.

Stanev's protagonist is a rationalist who yearns for **faith** but looks for (tried and tested) **knowledge** and thus he becomes enmeshed in countless procedures of verification and legitimization of the object of his **will**. His attitude is plagued by permanent doubt that prevents him from trusting in the Teacher's words or deeds. Looking for certainty (firstly trying to ascertain the existence of God and later trying to justify his betrayal) he is unable to ignore the promptings of his vainglorious intellect and finally, despairing, he commits suicide.

Judas boasts of the fact that he has successfully debunked Jesus's folly, but in truth his only achievement is debunking the traps of rational thinking. When pitted against "another dimension" (of reality) (Dupré, 1972), namely the dimension of faith, rationalism proves insufficient, and even destructive. According to the Bible, it is specifically pride and madness (folly), i.e. a godless life or the "betrayal of transcendence",²⁶ that leads to a fall (Titus 3:3–5; Sirach 3:25). When Judas accuses Jesus of enslaving the soul, in fact he blames himself for his own tragic end. It turns out that Judas only followed Jesus in

one think without using these categories? How can one think only about the economy, production and class struggle? The ruling class is afraid of thinking that incorporates transcendental ideas, they have always been afraid of it...

²⁵ In the context of Modernity cf. Bielik-Robson (2000, pp. 359–396).

²⁶ I am adopting here the term introduced by Rüdiger Safranski (1999, p. 44) in his book *Das Böse oder Das Drama der Freiheit (Evil or the drama of freedom)*. Cf. its application for the protagonist of Stanev's novel *Анмухпучм (The Antichrist)* in: Szwat-Gylybowa (2005, p. 218).

the flesh and not in spirit, and for this reason he cannot stand the atmosphere of miracles any longer and he begins to loathe Jesus. His betrayal is caused by resentment and anger. Judas is angry at himself that he was so **naïve** as to be lured by this madness.

Lazarus's motivation is in fact similar. Transformed by Jesus's miraculous intervention, he loses all his earlier spiritual sensitivity and becomes a materialist. Focused on his temporal needs, he cooperates with the enemies of the prophet in return for financial gains. But also in his case, the reasons behind his betrayal are somewhat ambiguous: on the one hand, he maintains that he does not remember anything from his "dream," but on the other hand, he complains that the Teacher **destroyed** his old life (even though he seems happy with his new one.)

И колкото повече се убеждаваше, че трябва да вярва само на разсъдъка си, и че Исус е лъжа, толкова по-силно ненавиждаше неговите последователи и сестрите си, защото всичко, което измъчва ума, човек бърза да го отрече и намрази (Станев, 1981, р. 391).²⁷

Similarly to Judas, Lazarus thinks that Jesus is a dangerous madman who tricks all those who follow him and also himself. He welcomes the news of Jesus's supposed defeat (i.e. the Crucifixion) because he does not want Jesus's lies to triumph over the world. Just like Judas, he wants the Christian hoax to be **debunked**.

One of the crucial themes of Stanev's story is that of truth. The matter of truth is paramount in the problematic episode of Lazarus's resurrection. This restoration to life is highly doubtful or even failed, as Jesus's agency brings to life **another** Lazarus, even though Jesus promised a resurrection of **spirit**. A question arises whether Jesus indeed possesses the power to resurrect the dead, or whether he is powerless in the face of human frailty. Additionally, the fact that the resurrected Lazarus gained reason but lost goodness of heart suggests that charity is a characteristic of the "**feeble-minded**", the insane or the mentally challenged. "**Common sense**" within this paradigm equals self-interest. On the other hand, it is evident that the post-transformation Lazarus is tormented by existential emptiness and he yearns to return to his old life. Just like in

²⁷ *The more he tried to persuade himself that he should trust in reason alone, and that Jesus is a fraud, the more his hatred of Jesus's followers rose. He also hated his own sisters more and more. For man will always reject and forsake all those things that cause his disquiet.*

the case of Judas, i.e. a sceptic who despite his attitude wants to **believe**,²⁸ it is difficult to class Lazarus within any given category. Initially, he was a mystic who simultaneously feared the “unknowable” and thirsted for **understanding**, and after his resurrection, when he became a rationalist (and a materialist) he started to yearn for those intense spiritual experiences from which he is now barred. Thusly, ambiguity turns out to be the main artistic device used for the characterization of the protagonists.²⁹

Ambiguity also manifests itself in the portrayal of Jesus. Jesus’s teaching show a clear Gnostic strain, which is visible especially in his remarks about the resurrection of the spirit, and also about the Kingdom of Heaven hidden inside the human soul. But at the same time, his belief that one can know God through nature is starkly opposed to Gnosticism.³⁰ The incomplete resurrection becomes a sign of God’s powerlessness in the matter of salvation. But on the other hand, in the face of Lazarus’s resistance, it also indicates lack of consent for free creation. This negative attitude can have its roots either in the fear of the Unknown/Unknowable or in the fear of undesirable change. A question arises therefore whether Judas foresaw his own fall or the victory of Jesus’s teaching. The anxiety caused by the possible triumph of Christianity would be one another proof that he is convinced of its falseness.

Stanev touches here on the fundamental experience of a modern man, i.e. the feeling of total enslavement, which refers to the mutually connected categories of truth and freedom.³¹ In this context, both reason and faith are valued

²⁸ The experience of mutual limitation of the yearning for faith and the dictates of reason is also visible in Stanev’s diaries. Cf. “Усещане за отвъдния. Разбира се илюзия. Казвам си, уж знам, знам, а не вярвам, че знам – не вярвам в това мое познание” (11.11.1978, Станев, 1998, p. 130). (*The sense of an afterlife. An illusion of course. I am saying to myself that I know, I know but I don’t believe that I know – I can’t believe in my own cognition.*) In his study of Stanev, Dimitar Efendulov (Ефендулов, 2005, p. 122) points to parallels between this aspect of his thought and the experiences of Leo Tolstoy (Станев, 1983, pp. 260–266).

²⁹ Stoyan Karolev (Каролев, 1982, pp. 188, 363–366) considers this complexity of characterization (achieved through showing a multiplicity of points of view and motivations) to be one of Stanev’s hallmarks, and attributes it to the writer’s interest in the “the dialectic of human soul.”

³⁰ Stanev’s diary is also a testament of his glorying in the contemplation of nature and the ability to feel uncomplicated joy thanks to the experience of “visible reality”: e.g. the entry for 7 July 1977 (Станев, 1998, p. 120).

³¹ The importance of the problem of knowledge and enslavement in “Lazarus and Jesus” is made even more manifest in Stanev’s notes and draft versions. Cf. the published fragments of the manuscript in: Пенчева (2003, pp. 47–48).

negatively. Whereas reason by limiting the perception, negates the possibility of the existence of transcendence, the faith involves turning against human rational nature.³² Thus, **the concept** of the Kingdom of Heaven becomes a source of oppression. The figure of Judas suggests a close connection between lying and power. Judas foresees the tyrannical rule of the new religion. The image of suicide creates an interpretative conundrum: the dying traitor in his last words talks about his wounded soul and addled reason which implies that his torment did not end with Jesus's crucifixion. The decision to take one's own life can be seen as a desperate attempt at **liberation**, but it remains unclear whether the suicide is caused by pangs of conscience (as in the biblical version), or maybe by doubts, or whether it should be viewed as a reaction against the triumph of the new science, whose signs are visible everywhere. In other words, is it a consequence of the awareness that one lives a lie?³³

It seems that ultimately, Stanev's deeply ambiguous paraphrase of a story from the Bible should not be read as a polemic against Christianity, understood as an irrational "truth" about transcendence, but as a polemic against Chris-

³² In this context, Stanev's diary entry of 14 August 1977 seems especially crucial: "Човекът търси истината чрез ума си и чрез душата си. Светът е забулен в тайна. В първия случай загубва общия смисъл на божиеото творение и подобно червей, който дълбае в дървото, не узнава що е дървото, а само дървесния прах, във втория се докосва с душата си до тайната, уви – непостижима за ума!" (Станев, 1998, p. 122). (*The man looks for truth using his reason or soul. The world is wrapped in mystery. If the man uses his reason, he loses the overall view of God's design. One is like a worm, eating at wood: the worm has no conception of the tree; all it knows is the wood dust. When one uses one's soul, one touches on the mystery which is – alas! – unreachable for the reason!.*) This passage provides an apt summary of Stanev's attitude on the nature of cognition and the place of man in the universe. This tragedy can be summarized as the agnostic experience.

³³ Stanev himself was fascinated with the necessity to live a lie, and this is testified by a diary entry of 12 October 1974: "Всеки живее с несъстоятелна надежда, че е безсмъртен. Тук е силата на живота – в лъжата. Но каква лъжа е тя? И нима може да се нарече лъжа самия живот? Тогава какъв смисъл има га търсим някаква истина вън от живота и с какво би ни ползвала тя? Но какво да се прави? Да живее човекът с такава истина, т.е. без тая „лъжа“, и който може да издържи, да не се обеси!" (Станев, 1998, p. 81). (*Everyone lives with an unjustified hope of immortality. This is what the strength of life rests on – a lie. But what lie is this? And whether one might call life itself a lie? And then, what would be the point of our quest for any truth outside life, what would be its purpose? Still, what can one do? Let the man live the lie, that is, let him live without this "lie." And those who can stand it, let them not hang themselves.*) It seems therefore that human tragedy consists of looking for the truth **in spite** of everything.

tianity as an *ideology*, i.e. a doctrine that promises future happiness but also oppresses the individual just as deeply as formal secular power.³⁴ Viewed in this light, the biblical narrative constitutes firstly a code that is readily understood by the reader and secondly – an antithesis of the author’s worldview. Here, orthodoxy only **represents** the object of reflexion, and the ideological message is created in a two-step process. First, the text’s focuses on the problem of faith/belief and then it moves to the question of power. The relationship between truth and freedom becomes a crucial interpretative perspective, and the figure of Judas becomes its beacon. The supposition that Jesus’s teachings are false refers to the school of Biblical exegesis that takes its roots from naturalist philosophy (i.e. from the Enlightenment tradition.) But the objection against Jesus’s teaching also stems from the total critique of **all** power, which links Stanev’s vision to modern critiques of religious institutions (which is quite interesting when we take into account the story’s date of composition.) The alleged authenticity of Lazarus’s story turns out to be a hoax and the setting of the story is quite sketchy, as it is usually the case in Stanev’s philosophico-historical works. In this perspective, Judas’s suicide would be prompted by despair caused by discovering of the most horrific of truths. Judas **wanted** to believe in spite of being a rational man, and because of this, he fell prey to an eschatological illusion. The realization of this fact, especially in the context of a more and more assured triumph of this illusion, must lead to despair. Thus, Stanev’s short story becomes a parable about the false premises of power. The story of the origins of Christianity shows the process of **gaining** power and thus it serves as an apt illustration. The new religion promises to abolish the fear of death, and thus it makes it impossible for the old religion to control the nation.³⁵ Also, the Jewish elites try to expose Jesus, but at the same time

³⁴ It corresponds with a belief, repeatedly stated by Stanev, that every power and also (or even especially) the one wielded in the name of God, constitutes counterfeit freedom. Cf. the diary entry for 10 January 1976. (Станев, 1998, p. 93). Stanev’s belief stems from his acceptance of the oppressive function of “truth.” In a note about Tolstoy he writes thus: “Всеки, който претендира, че знае истината, ще не ще, започва да деспотсува над другите, не търпи друга истина освен своята и с насилие я налага” (Станев, 1983, p. 264). (*Everyone who aspires to knowing the truth will, whether consciously or not, start to behave as a despot in his relations with others. He will hate all other truths except his own, and will try to impose it by force.*)

³⁵ Cf. the diary entry of 26 October 1978: “Всичко в живота, както се започне с раждането и свърши със смъртта, е насилие; експлоатацията също е насилие, а тя е неизбежна като храненето. Срещу постоянното вечно насилие човекът се утешава и лъже с идея за

they strive to **keep** their present status. The Jewish elites are convinced of their own special rights, and in their attempts to maintain them, they do not shun from manipulating their religious doctrine. This mechanism is visible in the description of their transaction with Lazarus.

The tenet that ideologies have a power to enslave leads to a question why men still **allow themselves** to be deceived. It seems that the answer lies in human nature itself, because it is imbued with a yearning for an axiological point of reference. The need to find **some** point of reference is expressed in constant search for a viable framework of reference and in a kind of (meta-physical) tremor. In Stanev's story, the rationalist does not rely absolutely on his reason, and the mystic does not fully trust his spiritual sensibility. As Judas's story demonstrates, this sworn rationalist makes a dialectical volte-face during his journey towards scepticism, and thus he finally negates all *ratio*. The existential rift must lead to a conclusion that the world is absurd. If in Stanev's view Christianity represents both a symbol of a (secular) ideology that enslaves, and an ideology itself, this representation also stems from accepting the "rational" tenets of agnosticism. The suspension of belief in transcendence and simultaneous questioning of the immanent order leads to passive nihilism.³⁶ Within this paradigm, only an **unconscious** person – a child – would be free from living the lie (or the horrific truth.) Adulthood is connected to

бога, справедливост, истина, право, нравствени императиви, безсмъртие. Къде е изворът на тия илюзии? Може би страхът е техен създател, страхът от смъртта... Иначе се налага да приемем съществуването на бога..." (Станев, 1998, pp. 129–130). (*Everything in life, from birth to death, is violence. Exploitation is also violence, but it is inescapable, just like eating. The man tries to find consolation in the face of this constant and eternal violence. He tries to cheat himself with the concepts of God, justice, truth, law, moral imperative or immortality. Where is the source of all these illusions? Perhaps they are born out of fear, out of fear of death... Otherwise we must accept the existence of God.*) Even though Stanev refers to these musings as "evil thoughts," similar themes constantly reappear both in his private and published writings. Both nihilistic concepts expressed in the entry above are pertinent for "Lazarus and Jesus": the belief that human life is governed by violence, and the assertion that the source of "metaphysical" illusions is the fear of death.

³⁶ Cf. Stanev's diary entry for 8 August 1974: "Превъплъщенията на писателя го завеждат в познание, от познание в погнуса от познание и накрая в лудост и куршум в главата. Който издържа, става мъдрец, разбрал „скръбната мъдрост“, при условие, че не започне да проповядва някаква глупост. Макар да става все по-ясен механизъмът, никак не разбирам защо е така..." (Станев, 1998, p. 87) (*Different personas of a writer lead him towards cognition, from cognition to abhorrence of cognition, and finally to madness and putting a bullet in one's brain. If one stops oneself, one becomes a sage full of "sad wisdom,"*

thirsting (for cognition,) and therefore to a feeling of **some** loss, and to hope and illusion that are connected to it. But the liberation does not bring back the feeling of carelessness. Instead, it brings the sense of a total lie, a lie that feels somewhat **necessary**.

Within this perspective, the fundamental difference between the two “traitors” becomes really distinct. The pre-resurrection Lazarus can be perceived as a pre-rational character who is however not self-sufficient, because he cannot come to terms with the experience of the Unknowable. After experiencing **a miracle** he turns into a modern rationalist who, in spite of some tremors in his heart, is by and large satisfied with his life. In contrast, Judas’s highly rational stance leads in the end to what might be termed a post-rational attitude. His quest for proof led him to negating all truths, i.e. to abandoning all anchors (sources of hope.) Living the **naked** truth, i.e. living with the consciousness of the all-encompassing lie, is unbearable. In the end, freedom proves illusory, because it is **only** subjective and it is acquired in return for the loss of meaning. Within this paradigm, a child, as a metaphor of the fool, becomes a figure of the blessed.

This nihilistic interpretation of the short story, which includes the suicide of the traitor, seem to be corroborated by another short story by Stanev, entitled “Последната притча” (*The Last Parable*) According to the author’s wife, he envisaged the story on 19 September 1968 (Станева, 1979, pp. 257–258), and later used the material in his novel *Антихрист* (*The Antichrist*) where it appears in the form of the protagonist’s dream (Станев, 2004, pp. 281–283).³⁷ The original version of the story centers around a rich Jew, who listens to Jesus’s teachings and agrees with him, but repeatedly puts off the decision to embrace the new religion. After the crucifixion, the protagonist rejoices that he was not lured by the lie, but when he hears of the resurrection he is inconsolable, as he now understands that he has made a bad choice. When on the next day he finds the prophet’s body buried in his own vineyard, he decides to commit suicide.

Тръгнал си човекът към къщи, но из улицата и над хората видял да се носи пак чудната светлина. Човекът знаел, че Исус е мъртъв и светлината е лъжлива, но не посмял да им каже. И за да не се изкуши и разкрие лъжата,

provided that one will not start preaching some silliness. Whereas the mechanics of it seems straightforward enough, I cannot for the life of me understand why it is so.)

³⁷ It should perhaps be clarified that the protagonist believes himself to be a reincarnation of Judas, and his tragedy is rooted in a rift between faith and cognition.

и за да не изчезне чудната светлина, той след няколко дни се обеси (Станева, 1979, р. 258).³⁸

When this material found its way into *The Antichrist*, its protagonist was Theophilus and the setting of the story is Tarnovo. Jesus is sentenced to die on the cross and the people do nothing to save him, even though they know that the Savior's death will lead to the end of the world. But when Theophilus finds Christ's body, he realizes that God lied even to his own son, making his sacrifice pointless. This realization becomes the source of both fear and satisfaction, and finally – the cause of Theophilus's death. The protagonist is hanged.

Тогава станах най-окаяният между човеците и най-самотният, защото, като узнах голата истина, не можех да я споделя с никого — ако я издадох, щеше да настъпи оня мрак. Ако я скриех, как щях да живея с нея? И разбрах, че устата ми сами ще проговорят, нозете ми сами ще отведат хората пред трапа и ръцете ми сами ще го посочат... Така се озовах при Юда Искариот и като него не ми оставаше друго, освен да се обеса. Взех въже, направих примка и пъгнах шията си в нея... (Станев, 2004, р. 283).³⁹

Thus the protagonist **saves** God's plan of salvation by becoming the victim of the plan's imperfections. Viewed in this light, Judas indeed becomes the savior of humanity, but not because he debunks Christ's false teaching (as was the initial intention of the protagonist of "Lazarus and Jesus"), but precisely because he refrains from exposing Jesus. His decision is imbued with additional symbolic significance once we realize that Jesus's buried body can be associated with a hidden treasure buried in a field. The Kingdom of Heaven, or an eschatological promise, thus proves to be an illusion that is **necessary** to live. From this perspective, Judas is not a traitor but a **savior** of transcendence.

³⁸ *So he went home, but when he was in the street, he saw strange radiance floating in the air above people's heads. He knew that Jesus was dead and that the radiance had to be a trick or an illusion, but he did not dare to tell it to the people. So in order not to succumb to the temptation and not to expose the lie, and because he did not want the strange radiance to vanish, he hanged himself several days later.*

³⁹ *Thus I became the loneliest and the most unfortunate of men, because once I have experienced the naked truth, there was no one I could share it with. If I revealed it, the darkness of hell would cover the earth. But how can I live on while I am hiding the truth? I suddenly understood that, fight it as I may, my lips will speak and I will lead people to this hole in the ground, and my hand will point the grave to them. So I felt exactly like Judas Iscariot and there was nothing left for me to do but to hang myself. I took the rope, I tied the noose and I put it around my neck.*

Stanev envisages an **eternal** rift between reason and spirit and between belief and knowing. But his stance harks back to something more than the tragedy of agnosticism. Paradoxically, it becomes a foundation for his belief that ignorance is a blessed state (albeit one that is impossible to achieve.)⁴⁰ This aporia is aptly illustrated by the story's final scene. Yearning for **some** vision of redemption, the inhabitants of Bethany reject Lazarus's testimony that debunks Jesus's teaching. The stoning of Lazarus is a poignant expression of the human yearning for meaning.⁴¹ The yearning can be expressed in three ways, symbolized by the figures of three members of the crowd – and their three voices. The first one stands for those who believe in Jesus's original teaching; the second – for fanatics, who manipulate the crowd's behavior in order to fulfil their own mistaken mission; and the third – and the weakest – voice from the crowd – belongs to the doubtful ones, who experience metaphysical horror. According to our interpretative paradigm, the three groups in Stanev's story would symbolize respectively the cheated, the mendacious, and those

⁴⁰ It seems that this blessed state is expressed in agnostic contemplation of the world, that assumes its purposefulness. Cf. Stanev's diary entry of 10 August 1974: "Да се радваш на света и да го приемеш като целеустроеност, значи благовейно да вярваш в бога, т.е. в нещо недостъпно за ума, което можеш само да съзърцаваш с радост и наслада от живота. Опиташ ли се да погледнеш на него чрез познанията, които ти дава науката, светът е безсмислен и страшен" (Станев, 1998, р. 87). (*To draw joy from the world and to perceive it as a coherent and purposeful structure means to worship god, that is to believe in something inaccessible for reason, that you can only contemplate with joy and pleasure derived from life. If you try to look at it through the prism of knowledge, given to you by science, the world grows senseless and terrifying.*)

⁴¹ This interpretation is corroborated by Stanev's diary entry of 27 January 1978: "Човекът помни и почита този, който му обещава светло бъдеще, който му вдъхва вяра и надежда и който му казва, че го обича, макар това да е лъжа. Оня, който му казва някакви неприятни истини (а истините, големите истини са винаги неприятни), скоро се забравя и не се тачи и обича. Големи истини оголват самия живот и всяка ценност – те са против живота, отрова за живота. Но да се чудиш и маеш, човекът все търси някаква истина, а бяга и се бои от нея, живее с илюзия и лъжата..." (Станев, 1998, р. 126) (*A man will remember and cherish someone who promises them a magnificent future, who brings them faith and hope and who tells them that he loves him, even though it is a lie. Someone who speaks uncomfortable truths (and truths, the big truths, will always be uncomfortable) will be quickly forgotten, and will not be worshipped or cherished. The big truths lay bare life itself and rob it of all value – they are against life, they are a poison of life. However much you can wonder at it, the man is always on the lookout for some truth, but he also runs away from it and fears it, living a life surrounded by illusions and lies.*)

who yearn for lies to give meaning to their existence. All these three groups are **in some way** enslaved.

Why is it that the final section of the story contains a question about Truth that refers to Pilate's famous ironic question (John 18:38)?⁴² If the problem of freedom is linked to making decisions in unity with oneself (Arendt, 1978, pp. 241–280), the rift leads to an attitude that is perpetually inauthentic (unfaithful) and incomplete. The figure of Jesus's traitor thus becomes a victim of double enslavement (and **unfaithfulness**). Within the paradigm of religious experience, the source of enslavement is Reason that bars one from the *sacrum* and leads one astray into the deserts of total independence. In turn, on a social plane, the enslavement is a result of Ideology (dialectically linked to Reason), which is understood as self-illusion. Committing suicide after facing the ultimate truth suggests that only a lie can be "redemptive," and as such, it constitutes the logical closure to a tragedy of a strict rationalist, or an agnostic who is torn between belief and knowledge, and also a dialectical rebuttal of the story's departure point.⁴³

It appears therefore that Stanev's message is deeply nihilistic: the illusions are highly addictive and conducive to survival. In the context of the triumph of Communist ideology at the time of the story's composition, the overall message seems to express a tragic yearning for the **lost** "false consciousness." Granted, the false consciousness enslaved the individual, but it also protected him/her – also from himself/herself.⁴⁴ This advantage becomes especially

⁴² One should remember that this question follows Jesus's words that he came into the world to bear witness unto the truth (John 18:37–38). Cf. also John 8:31–32. One should also take into account Stanev's ironic remark noted in his diary on 2 May 1975: "Истината винаги е обещава да открие лицето си. Вечна надежда! Тя открива само носа си или средния си пръст и подобно хоризонта мами да вървим напред..." (Станев, 1998, p. 92). (*The truth always promises to show us her face. An eternal hope! But she only shows us the tip of her nose or her middle finger: just like the line of the horizon, it lures us to march forward...*)

⁴³ It is worth highlighting that Karolev rates Stanev as a dialectician (Каролев, 1982, p. 394). Karolev takes into account primarily Stanev's interest in "the dialectic of human soul" and because of it, he compares him to Tolstoy. It is especially vital to point out to Karolev's remarks (which are on the margin of his main argument) about Stanev's dialectic experience of the world. Stanev's artistic creed is especially connected with his orientation towards existential contradiction (**unambiguity**).

⁴⁴ The purported objective truth appears to be a tool of the veiled attempts to secure a monopolistic position. A discussion of the idea of "false consciousness" as an inspiration for the birth of sceptical and relativist postmodernist epistemology (understood as a radical

visible when one compares it with the emptiness that is a result of rejection of the false consciousness. Stanev's short story obliquely demonstrates the consequences of debunking of all "meta-narratives" or ideologies, so in essence it talks about the postmodern experience. One might take inspiration from Nietzsche's thought and claim that the story presents a situation in which people lose illusions concerning the fundamental meaning of truth and it shows a world in which the "will to truth" becomes "the will to illusion," whereas the latter takes up the appearance of the "will to truth."⁴⁵ The consciousness that no fiction ("ideology") is innocent coincides with a yearning for hope, even though all hope has been lost as a result of the departure from the epistemological (and axiological) optimism of the Enlightenment. The knowledge demonstrated by Stanev's protagonist is therefore **tragic**, because life without illusions (and therefore "in truth") means living with a consciousness that there is nothing except the illusions and as a consequence – that the truth does not exist (Buczyńska-Garewicz, 2008, pp. 68–69).

The overall message of the text is clearly heterodox. The story paraphrases the biblical narrative in order to present the story *à rebours*. Stanev shows a world without God, in which the danger of manipulation is linked to the existential need for transcendence (which is an inherent feature of humanity). Contrary to the usual presentation of the problem, the danger of manipulation in Stanev's work is not related to the consciousness of human individuality or to the wrongly conceived freedom and autonomy. Here, the thirst for transcendence leads to manipulation and therefore to enslavement and confusion. Viewed in this light, Judas, the lonely debunker becomes a benefactor (a "savior") of humankind, but in a reversed plane of immanence. Stanev, who wrote under a Communist

version of the critical thinking regarding the validity of knowledge) can be found in: Szczegółą (1999, pp. 285–314).

⁴⁵ Nietzsche (1966) objected to the Platonic epistemological legacy (and the ideal of objective truth,) because he regarded "the truth" as a dynamic product of creative thinking and positioned it therefore in the aesthetic order. He believed that most people live an illusion, yearning for a soothing "metaphysical" truth. It is worth stressing that in the end, the truth is expressed only as a series of relative (transient and remote) images. It can be seen therefore as an endless line of illusions. Viewed from this perspective, the truth is the certainty of uncertainty. Reaching the truth means losing it. For more see Buczyńska-Garewicz (2008, pp. 35–69); Filipowicz (2011, pp. 65–99). For Nietzsche, the critique of the "will to truth" also meant rejecting the cult of science and politics, as two spheres were permeated with illusions of the most dangerous sort. This idea seems to correspond with negative views regarding science and politics that are scattered in Stanev's diaries.

regime, endeavored to challenge not only the Biblical text and the orthodoxy, but also the modern worldview. He seemingly talks only about the problem of religiosity, but obliquely addresses the issue of man's existential insufficiency. Thanks to his engagement with a Christian canonical text, he becomes the author of a modern apocryphon, which however does not urge for the resurrection of the "murdered" God. Instead, it laments **the rift** caused by the death. It also refers to the atheist concept of the perfect life as a projection of human desires.⁴⁶ In Stanev's vision, there is no place for the *sacrum* in the Christian sense of the term, and the "Gospel" is not a blessed message. Stanev tries to divert the readers' attention from the absence of the Transcendence and channel it towards the idea of looking for **the spirit** within and in the surrounding world. But when the *sacrum* is conceived along these lines – as the *ratio* of the existence, it constitutes only a demand of the practical reason: "Ако не съществува световен разум, всичко губи смисъла си" (Станев, 1998, p. 92).⁴⁷

All in all, "Lazarus and Jesus" is an adaptation of the biblical narrative written by Stanev in the context of an oppressive state that limited artists' creative freedom. The atheist worldview was the hallmark of the public life. In this context, Stanev's story demonstrates its affinity with other modern day apocrypha written under totalitarian regimes that make use of the Judaeo-Christian tradition for polemical purposes. Such apocrypha typically do not serve as meditations on the experience of the death of God. Instead, they offer insights into the contemporary condition of enslavement by regimes and ideologies. Admittedly, Stanev poses a question about the nature of faith and the role of reason in the man's spiritual life, in a world dominated by rationalist and pragmatic thinking. When one takes into consideration all of the author's *oeuvre*, it becomes evident that Stanev is more focused on the vision of human

⁴⁶ This brings to mind the philosophical ideas of the founding fathers of materialistic atheism: Paul d'Holbach and Ludwig Feuerbach, who (based on the Enlightenment doctrine of reason) interpreted the idea of God as a result of the projection of aspirations of imperfect human beings. Cf. Łysień (2004, pp. 63–76). There is an obvious parallel with Stanev's diary entry of 2 March 1978 in which he muses on the simplicity of the idea of God. The entry seems to be tightly connected with his concept of power as a source necessary to survive enslavement: "Колко проста е идеята за бота, съвсем проста! Очевидно тя е възникнала в ума от нуждата да се представи светът единен, опростен чрез силата и волята на едно висше същество. От същото се създава държавната власт..." (Станев, 1998, p. 127). (*How simple the idea of God is, how absolutely simple! Apparently it was born in the human mind out of a need to see the world as coherent, to see it simplified through the power and will of some higher being. And political power is born out of the same need...*)

⁴⁷ *If the worldly reason does not exist, everything is devoid of sense.*

imperfection and human propensity to yield to fraudulent suggestion (both internal and external,) which is related to the former. Drawing inspiration from the rationalist and sceptical legacy of the Enlightenment, and in the face of the radical opposition between belief and knowledge and of the demand to free oneself from the (allegedly) oppressive concept of God, Stanev preaches the impossibility of faith/trust, which he sees as one half of the perspective of the man's "metaphysical" rift. In the end, he presents the nihilistic consequences of falling into *the trap* of agnosticism. By laying bare the (in)consequences of rationalist thinking, Stanev provides a pessimistic diagnosis of the modern human condition, the sense of confusion, and also of the desperate search for a valid framework of reference, which is undertaken in a world that has undergone total immanentization. The change of direction is also evoked in the very title of the story, in the reversal of the customary order of the two names.

In this way, Stanev's apocryphon becomes a universal parable about the human condition. It talks about a man who cannot stand his own divine creator (it is as if in the man's nature). The man's attitude is motivated by the self-referential demands of the "mature" reason. The fate of Judas as a debunker in fact debunks the modern illusion of freedom. When one takes into account the story's date of composition, and the author's political entanglement, it turns out to be a poignant testament of the tragic experience of a world without God, where **falsity** is the only truth.

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W pułapce agnostycyzmu, czyli Judasz według Emiliana Stanewa

Artykuł omawia problematykę nowoczesnego poczucia totalnego zniewolenia. Przedmiotem uwagi jest opowiadanie Emiliana Stanewa *Лазар и Исус* (*Lazarz i Jezus*, 1977), zaś kontekstem – osobisty dziennik autora oraz rola jego Judasza jako demistyfikatora Chrystusowej nauki. Postawiona przez pisarza diagnoza wiecznego rozdarcia między duchem a rozumem staje się nie tylko kryptonimem tragizmu postawy agnostycznej, lecz – paradoksalnie – także przesłanką dla tezy o błogosławionym, choć niemożliwym do osiągnięcia stanie niewiedzy. Utwór interpretowany jest jako głęboko ambiwalentna polemika nie tyle z religią chrześcijańską jako irracjonalną „prawdą” o transcendencji, co z ideologią, tj. doktryną obiecującą przyszłe szczęście, choć równie zniewalającą jak formalna władza świecka.

Słowa kluczowe: Emilian Stanev, Judasz, Biblia, Nowoczesność, agnostycyzm, ideologia, literatura bułgarska

In the Trap of Agnosticism: Judas according to Emiliyan Stanev

The article discusses the modern sensation of complete enslavement. It offers an in-depth analysis of Emiliyan Stanev's short story *Lazarus and Jesus* (*Lazar i Isus*; 1977) in the context of relevant entries from the author's diaries. The article centres on the presentation of Judas as a debunker of Christ's teaching. Stanev presents his vision of a permanent rift between spirit and reason that is not only a clear expression of the tragedy of agnosticism, but also, paradoxically, an indication that the state of ignorance is blessed, albeit impossible to achieve. Stanev's story can be interpreted as a deeply ambiguous polemic not only with Christian religion understood as an "irrational" truth about transcendence but also with ideology, i.e. a doctrine that promises future happiness but is just as oppressive as formal secular power.

Keywords: Emiliyan Stanev, Judas, Bible, Modernity, agnosticism, ideology, Bulgarian literature

Notka o autorze

Ewelina Drzewiecka (ewelina.drzewiecka@gmail.com) – badaczka kultury i literatury bułgarskiej; doktor nauk humanistycznych; magister teologii ogólnej; adiunkt w Instytucie Sławistyki Polskiej Akademii Nauk oraz w Centrum Cyrylometodejskim Bułgarskiej Akademii Nauk. Autorka książek: *Śmierć Judasza w Biblii i tradycji chrześcijańskiej* (2012), *Herezja Judasza w kulturze (po)nowoczesnej. Studium przypadku* (2016), współautorka książki *Leksykon tradycji bułgarskiej* (2011). Zainteresowania naukowe: kultura bułgarska, tradycja judeochrześcijańska, historia idei, relacje między religią a Nowoczesnością.

Ewelina Drzewiecka, PhD (ewelina.drzewiecka@gmail.com) – PhD in cultural studies and MA in theology; Assistant Professor at the Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences; Assistant Professor at the Cyrillo-Methodian Research Centre, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Author of the books: *Śmierć Judasza w Biblii i tradycji chrześcijańskiej* (2012), *Herezja Judasza w kulturze (po)nowoczesnej. Studium przypadku* (2016), and *Leksykon tradycji bułgarskiej* (with co-authors, 2011). Research interests: Bulgarian culture; Judeo-Christian tradition; history of ideas; relation between religion and Modernity.