

## THE IMAGE OF GOD IN THE WORKS OF FRANZ WERFEL

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**Summary.** *F. Werfel (1890-1945) – a representative of Austrian expressionism. A Jew by birth, he was interested in theology from an early age. One of the main themes of his work was the theme of man’s faith in God. The religious quest of Franz Werfel, depending on his life circumstances (military service, marriage to a Catholic, the death of his son) and world cataclysms (World War I, the breakup of Austria-Hungary) passed through periods of faith in God, his strength, and doubts about his justice (“The Creation of Music” 1913, “The Death of Moses” 1914, “Theology” 1914, “The Creation of Joke” 1918, “The Blasphemy of Madness” 1918) and the denial of the existence of God in general (“The Black Mass” 1919, “The Man from the Mirror” 1920). God appears in the novels and dramas of Werfel then as an evil and unjust judge and executioner, then as a mad beggar, and then as the creator of beauty. In this work, we want to explore in detail the causes of Werfel’s religious offerings, the stages in the evolution of his attitude towards God, and changes in the image of God in his novels and plays.*

**Key words:** *God, Expressionism, Werfel, faith, religious motives, Judaism, Austrian literature.*

## Introduction

The subject of research in this scientific work is the theme of God in the works of F. Werfel throughout 10-20 years of his work. The subject of the study is the transformative theme of God in these texts.

The material of the study is the prose of Werfel and these are his novels: "The Creation of Music" 1913, "The Death of Moses" 1914, "Theology" 1914, "The Creation of Joke" 1918, "The Blasphemy of Madness" 1918, "The Black Mass" 1919, and the drama "The Man from the Mirror" 1920. The purpose of the work is to show how in his aesthetic searches, Werfel transforms the image of God in his works.

The development of expressionism in Austria is associated, first of all, with the historical events of the twentieth century. The First World War, the dissolution of Austria-Hungary, the death of the monarchical system – all this became one of the reasons for the crisis of the human spirit and consciousness, disbelief in God. The existential crisis forced Expressionist writers to search in their work for a "new man", a messiah capable of transforming the world. At the same time, the work of poets traces both the denial of God and religion in general, and a deep faith in His power. Many of the researchers emphasized this duality in the texts of this direction: V. Knewels, E. Lämmert, S. Vieta. According to V. Sedelnik expressionists tried to "pave the way for a new religion of universal sound, free from confessional differences and strife."<sup>1</sup> At the same time expressionists in their searches applied not only to the Christian religion, but also to other religions, teachings and even pagan cults. Insanity, self-denial seemed to the representatives of this direction the only way to know God. (A striking example is G. Kaiser's play "Noli me tangere" ("Don't touch me", 1922), which traces the motive of self-sacrifice in the name of all mankind as well as Stadler's poem "Conversation":

"I'm on my knees before your threshold to let in prayer. You see, I wander around blindly in life to the nabirants, | and no one will tell me the way home. Let the homeless shelter [in your garden and catch your breath, splinters of life glue in a quiet half-price"<sup>2</sup>

The image of God in the work of expressionists is ambivalent. On the one hand, God is just, kind, a man must be equal to the Creator, while on the other hand, the Lord is a cruel deceiver deciding the destiny of man.

"You're going to bury me, pour some dirt on the ground." / Yes, then you are right there, with a wry smile, / Enemy, tyrant ... / Deceptive, fatal! The lies are mottled! Datura is grass. Anguish, and poison, and beauty "<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, writers saw a revival of inhumanity not only in the image of God, but also in the person, the Messiah. He had to take the place of the Lord and lead humanity to salvation. At the same time, the "new man" had to give up his past life, go through a path of suffering, and cleanse himself of sinful thoughts. The idea of a "new man" is in the texts of F. Werfel, G. Kaiser, E. Toller, and others.

Not only had historical events influenced the worldview of the Expressionists, but also the philosophy of F. Nietzsche. His thought of the death of God, of the superman, caused

1 Sedelnik, V.D. Religia i ekspressionism [Religion and expressionism], Moscow: 2008, p.473

2 Stadler, E. Zwiesgesprach, Die Aktion, 1912 Jg.2.24 p.754

3 Rheiner, W. Rheiner, W. An Gott Ich bin ein Mensch – ich fürchte mich. Vergessene Verse und Prosaversuche. Assenheim, 1986. , p.40

artists to think about the freedom of the spirit, the destruction of the spirit-restraining frame. Freud's works were no less influential, in which the impotence of the mind was described before the inner insanity. G. Kaiser wrote: "Ich kenne nur zwei Unsterbliche: Plato und Nietzsche. Wenn ich auf eine einsame Insel verbannt würde, hätte ich an den Büchern dieser Beiden wollaufengug" ("I only know two immortals: Plato and Nietzsche. If I were banished to a lonely island, I would want the books of those two, willy-nilly")<sup>4</sup>

## 1.

A vivid representative of Austrian expressionism is F. Werfel (1890-1945). A Jew by birth, he was interested in theology from an early age. When only 10 years old, Werfel was considered almost the "Messiah" of Prague Expressionism. In fact, he is one of the first expressionist poets expressed in his poems the category of "alien": Motives of total alienation pour out into the motive of self-estrangement and rejection of one's own self. In the days of the revolutionary battles of 1918-1919, Werfel embodied in his work the hopes, dreams and tragic contradictions characteristic of most Expressionists - the desire for social justice, on the one hand, the rejection of any kind of violence, on the other. That is why the Hitlerites, coming to power, destroyed books and Expressionist paintings, and Expressionist art was declared alien to the German race. The second poetic collection, "We Exist" (1913), testifies that over the past two years, Werfel has revised many things in his views, having convinced himself how deep internal contradictions are in the sphere of social relations. The feeling of inner emptiness, the consciousness of loneliness push the poet towards mysticism and God-seeking. Through his soul, his psychological state, Werfel tried to reflect the inconsistency and tragedy of the world. One of the motives for his poetics is insanity. The lyrical hero in insanity finds solace, a way to justify his disagreement with the surrounding reality. One of the main themes of his work was the theme of man's faith in God. The religious quest of Franz Werfel, depending on his life circumstances (military service, marriage to a Catholic, the death of his son) and world cataclysms (World War I, the dissolution of Austria-Hungary), there were periods of faith in God, his strength, doubts about his justice ("The Creation of Music" 1913, "The Death of Moses", 1914, "The Creation of a Joke" 1918, "The Blasphemy of Madness", 1918, "Theology" 1919, "The Black Mass" of 1919) and the denial of the existence of God in general ("Man from the Mirror" 1920). God appears in novels and dramas of Werfel then as an evil and unjust judge and executioner, then as a mad beggar, then as the creator of the beautiful. In this paper, we want to explore in detail the causes of Werfel's religious offerings, the stages in the evolution of his attitude toward God, the changes in the image of God in the novels and plays of the writer.

Prologue of Werfel's creative endeavours was his drama "Temptation" (1913). In the written in the years of his formation, when he tries himself not only in lyrics and drama, but also writes the first novels, in the drama in the foreground there is

4 Kaiser, G. Die zwölf unsterblichen Dichter. Antwort auf eine Rundfrage der New York Times. Werke: in 6 Bde. - Bd. 4. Filme, Romane, Erzählungen, Aufsätze, Gedichte / hrsg. v. W. Huder. - Berlin [u.a.]: Propylaen-Verl., 1971. p. 591.

that same protagonist, the “new man” who follows the path of liberation and rebirth. The protagonist has a talent, but suffers from an awareness of the conflict between the poet’s higher mission and low earthly passions. According to the teaching of the apostle Paul (Gal. 5:17), a man is always tormented by conflict of spirit and flesh. The desires of the flesh are low, all sins are born from this (hatred, adultery, drunkenness, etc.), and therefore it is necessary to do as the spirit tells. Only spiritual purity, love, mercy will lead man to God. “Temptation” is the semi-fantastic dialogue of the Poet with the Devil and the Archangel. The sequence of meetings already carries in itself an important idea for the author: in order to meet an angel, one must first go through trials, reject evil, overcome the Devil tempting him and the desire of the flesh. The collision of the Poet and Satan can also be interpreted as a clash of eras. Only the “new man” that has begun to form with still obscure goals is opposed to the Devil, who carries the obsolete value “load,” so it is so obvious that the protagonist opposes vague, poetically vague arguments to the clear proposals of the tempter.

In his first works Werfel tries to convey to the reader the idea of the imperfection of God. As evidence, he cites the biblical plot of the expulsion of man from Paradise. After all, if a person is created in God’s image, then how could he break the order of God and taste the forbidden fruit? Does this mean that there is a mistake in the likeness of the Lord? This reasoning we find in the novel “The Creation of Music”. God, saddened by the expulsion of a man from Paradise, talks about his imperfection and tries again to create a world free from injustice and cruelty. However, it only turns out to create a memory of this good world in the form of music. In this novel God is imperfect, but authoritative and just. He can still help a person, remind him of kindness and compassion.

In the novel “The Death of Moses,” written a year later, the Lord is no longer so unequivocally true. In this text Moses tries to persuade God not to take his life and let in the Promised Land. The author in the words of Moses points to the unjust decision of the Lord, because the great prophet fulfilled all that God had told him. Werfel quotes verses to Torah: “And there was no more a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face.”<sup>5</sup> However, no pleas have compelled the Lord to change his decision, and He personally takes the prophet’s soul to heaven. Already in this novel, Werfel proclaims the power of the human soul: none of the angels sent could not take the soul of Moses, so he was great.

## 2.

In 1917, Werfel met Alma Mahler, a Catholic and an anti-Semite. The couple will only get married in 1929, but the writer immediately fell under the strong influence of his bride. In 1918 they have a son, who dies after only 10 months. All this greatly influenced Werfel’s mental state. At this time, he writes two novels at once, where the image of God gradually decreases. In the story “Creation of a joke” the Lord again announces his error: “My creatures will always blame me, because I could not create my own perfection, but I created my defectiveness, from which they will be mortally tormented.”<sup>6</sup> But if in this

5 Werfel, F. Chernaya messa [The Black Mass]; per. s nem. A. Kantor, Moscow: Eksmo, 2005, p.75.

6 *Ibid.* p.381.

novel God is still powerful, then in the “Blasphemy of Madness” the Lord appears before us in the form of a madman. He lives in a madhouse, a nurse brings him a dinner. His guests, he only asks that they believe that he is God. “Gentlemen, I urge you to believe me. I ask you only for respect for your own weakness, which I considered it an honour to share with you. Put yourself in my place! Imagine how you would not believe that you are exactly what you want to appear, for whom you are betraying yourself!”<sup>7</sup> And here the protagonist again repents of his mistake: “Since we meet only at these moments, I confess to you that I, gentlemen, are constantly gnawing at the feeling of guilt in your existence”<sup>8</sup>

He declares his cowardliness when, being crucified on the cross, he suddenly thought about how they would suffer after death. This thought caused the suffering of all mankind. The Lord knows nothing more about Paradise, denies his existence due to the “badly arranged” earthly world. Here it should be recalled that in 1918 the First World War ended, after which the works of many writers reflected the horrors of death, the ruthlessness and senselessness of the destruction of mankind. Werfel, who served in the army, was no exception. His faith in charity, God’s justice was destroyed by the consequences of the war. The Lord, according to the author, is powerless, but he never had power, and most of all he hates the righteous: “Do you know how I hated the best man of Moses? Where is my whip? What a pleasure I experienced when I showed him the Promised Land and did not let him go there!”<sup>9</sup> The Lord does not cause fear or trembling anymore, he collects musical instruments and waits for the “hostess” (nurse) to bring him dinner.

The theme of God’s powerlessness goes on in the novel “Theology”, where the creator of Life (in this case the name of the heroine) is trying to keep up with God’s rhythm. “Is it not for this that I created you so that your being in Me would remain so that you would eternally observe the crests of My inner rotation, and press against the bell tower of My games so that I could see Yourself in the mirror of your eyes?”<sup>10</sup> However, he is too slow and melancholy to catch Life. The author portrays the God of the ridiculous grumpy narcissistic old man who orders Life to disappear, but she is not in his power.

Finally, in the novel “The Black Mass”, God loses not only his power, justice, wisdom, but he is demonized altogether:

“You spoke just about the revelation of the prophet Elijah. So Elijah is the second embodiment of that essence, the first incarnation of which was Enoch, and the third is Christ. This essence is embodied in such times when the one who is called “Lord”, “Lord of the armies”, “The Highest”, is afraid of the overthrow of the throne and of his debunking.”<sup>11</sup>

In the opinion of one of the heroes, Dr. Grau, God was a demon who seized power and was forced to create his likeness in the person of man, but man inherited “the thirst for the spread of his own” I “. However, the protagonist in the person of a Catholic priest is appalled by this hypothesis. The struggle of the Jewish and Catholic views goes not only on the pages of the novel, but also in the mind of the writer himself.

7 *Supra* note 5.

8 *Ibid.* p.382.

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.* p.386.

11 *Ibid.* p.57.

“The Black Mass” echoes the novel “Doctor Faustus” by T. Mann. Like Werfel, Mann tries to find a way out of the crisis of consciousness in the rethinking of Goethe’s Faust. From the genre mixture, chaos, both writers are trying to build a logical and harmonious world. Mann chooses music for this, Werfel prescribes it in the field of theatre and music. The duality of consciousness, the spiritual crisis of the hero bear the imprint of the crisis of consciousness in the early twentieth century. The shipyard as a result does not offer an unambiguous way out of this spiritual dissonance. For him, the result is one. God is the essence, thirsting for power, Man is sinful and doomed. This basic idea Werfel managed to convey with the help of the genre of “intellectual romance”. He combined in one text the genre of life, confession, history of the formation of personality, journalism and parable. Synthesis of genres allowed Werfel to show the cause of the collapse of mankind in the contradiction of Man, disharmony with himself and with God.

### 3.

In 1920, his tragedy “A Man from a Mirror” comes out. The main hero of this work is Tamal, who is looking for salvation in a Buddhist temple. It is known that Expressionists were actively involved in Oriental culture, Werfel was no exception. It is known that the basis of Buddhism is not the image of God, but the teachings of the enlightened Buddha, who discovered in his mind that the cause of the pain and suffering of man is himself, his sinfulness. Tamala, in order to come to rebirth, it is necessary to defeat the devil, who appeared from the mirror, when the main character looked at his reflection. A person from a mirror convinces his creator in his chosenness. Tamal considers himself a messiah and returns to the past in order to pass the tests he prepared. But the crowd in search of a saviour defiles the statues of the gods, animated by the appearance of the seductive dancer, Filli. The crowd has no specific names (First, second, third man, woman). With the announcement of Tamal as the new messiah, the crowd of men and women is replaced by faceless voices. They evaluate the appearance of the new saviour, inventing a biography for him. Voices lose their difference and turn into mass. With the victory of Tamala, the voices become “hysterical exclamations.” Gradually, the voices of admirers turn into those asking for work, getting rid of illnesses. However, all this is interrupted by a notice that the new god is a murderer. Voices turn “furious” and drive away Tamala. The new speaker changes the mood of the crowd, and in this way, Werfel shows how easy it is to get people to believe in anything. Of course, this vision of the author reflected the crisis of post-war times, when various political and philosophical trends, including racism, began to gain strength. The only one who opposes the crowd is the High Priest, apparently a representative of liberalism, but the crowd does not listen to him, and the new god kills them all. However, he can’t overcome his own vanity and selfishness, and as a result this, his father, beloved, and son die. Tamal repents and is reborn. However, God is not a wise and just saviour in this text. Werfel leads the reader to the conclusion that only man himself can atone for his sins and be saved.

As a matter of fact, Werfel reveals the reasons for the God-defeated humanity in the novel “The House of Sorrow”. In the image of the city, as he appears in the story

“The House of Sorrow,” the recognizable biblical-mythological meanings are obviously actualized. First of all, the myth of Sodom and Gomorrah is connected with it. It’s a damned, sinful city that was doomed to perdition. God sends angels there to see if the inhabitants of both cities are so sinful and destroy them, for there are not even ten righteous men for whom God would have spared the cities. In the “House of Sorrow” outside the city, the public house on Gramsgasse is biased. We are represented by all strata of society: priests, peasants, prostitutes, military, lawyers, poets and even emperors of Austria. But they are all sinners, the roads of each of them converge in the House of Sorrow. However, we do not find among them a single righteous person, the house of debauchery of the physical and mental is doomed to death. Werfel does not find in the modern world righteous people, for the sake of which humanity could be saved. The old world must be destroyed for purification and regeneration.

#### 4.

In spite of this, Werfel again returns in his novels to the image of God. The last novel with religious themes was his book “The Song of Bernadette”, written in 1941, when Werfel has to emigrate to America under the threat of fascist violence. This is a real story about a poor girl named Bernadette from a French village, which was actually the Virgin Mary. “I dared to sing Bernadette’s eulogy,” Werfel writes in the preface to his book, “although I am not a Catholic, moreover, I am a Jew. The courage for this was given to me by a much earlier and much more unconscious vow. I swore to myself always and everywhere to glorify with my creations the divine mystery and human holiness – in spite of our time, in which mockery, anger and indifference turns its back on these greatest values of our lives.”<sup>12</sup> The main heroine of this novel was born in a simple family, and her thoughts were occupied not by a thirst for faith, but hunger and cold. Moreover, she didn’t know anything about the Holy Trinity. However, her childlike spirit was pure, and it is to her that the Virgin Mary came, announcing future miracles. Bernadette had to face human unbelief and cruelty. But all this did not prevent her from hearing the “Lady”, as she called her, and fulfilling all her requests. Thanks to her faith, people believed in miracles and received healing, and after the death of the old priest, Peramal exclaims, “Your life is just beginning, O Bernadette! These words mean not only; you are now in Heaven”, about Bernadette. “They mean that you are now in Heaven and on earth. Your eyes saw more than ours. In your heart, there was more love than our roughened hearts could contain.”<sup>13</sup> For the reader, it is not the envoy herself who is important, but the fate of the girl, who has to defend her point of view by fighting the church for her faith in the power of good. The fearlessness of the girl is stronger than her hostile environment. In this female image, Werfel joined together the two sides of the expressionistic image of a woman. On the one hand, this is a suffering girl, while on the other, a girl in whom there lives a mystery incomprehensible to others. In this novel, Werfel covers the idea of the power of faith in God and the belief in His justice.

12 Werfel, F. *The Song of Bernadette*; St. Martin Press, 1989, p.5.

13 *Ibid.* p.570.

## Conclusion

Thus, throughout his entire creative path, one can trace the author's religious views. Werfel describes a powerful God, capable of deciding the fate of people and a weak God, repentful of his own defectiveness and weakness. The Lord finds demonic features, exposing human sinfulness. Finally, the image of God is replaced by the image of the "new man", who is able to obtain salvation through repentance. But despite all this, Werfel again returns to faith in the Lord and a man capable of preserving the purity of his soul in a world full of cruelty and injustice. In this manner, the works of F. Werfel reflected the whole era, as well as the people in it. By embodying his faith in man, the author was able to express the basic moods of the twentieth century, its contradictory nature, and the fears and hopes of a difficult time.

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## DIEVO ĮVAIZDIS FRANZO WERFELIO DARBUOSE

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**Santrauka.** Ekspresionizmo plėtra Austrijoje pirmiausia siejama su XX a. istoriniais įvykiais. Pirmasis pasaulinis karas, Austrijos-Vengrijos likvidavimas, monarchijos nunykimas – visa tai sudarė prielaidas formuotis dvasios ir sąmonės bei tikėjimo krizei. Egzistencinė krizė privertė ekspresionistų rašytojus ieškoti savo darbuose „naujo žmogaus“, mesijaus, galinčio pakeisti pasaulį. Darbai vienu metu atskleidžia Dievo ir religijos apskritai neigimą ir gilų tikėjimą Dievo galia.

Ryškus Austrijos ekspresionizmo atstovas yra žydų kilmės F. Werfelis (1890–1945). Jis domėjosi teologija nuo ankstyvo amžiaus. Viena iš pagrindinių jo darbo temų – žmogaus tikėjimas Dievu. Religinės Franzo Werfelio paieškos lemtos jo gyvenimo aplinkybių (karinės tarnybos, katalikiškos santuokos, sūnaus mirties patirtys) ir pasaulio kataklizmų (Pirmasis pasaulinis karas, Austrijos-Vengrijos žlugimas). Pirmuose savo darbuose Werfelis bando interpretuoti Dievo netobulumo idėją. Kaip įrodymus jis cituoja Biblinį žmogaus trėmimo iš Rojaus epizodą. Teigiama, kad jei žmogus yra sukurtas pagal Dievo įvaizdį, kaip jis galėjo pažeisti Dievo tvarką ir trokšti draudžiamo vaisiaus? Ar tai reiškia, kad padaryta kūrėjo klaida? Werfelio romanuose ir dramose Dievas pasirodo ir kaip blogis, ir neteisingas teisėjas, ir budelis, kartais menko išvalgumo, kaip grožio kūrėjas. Šiame darbe ketinama nagrinėti Werfelio religinių haliucinacijų priežastis, jo santykių su Dievu evoliucijų, Dievo įvaizdžio romanuose ir pjesėse pokyčius. Werfelis kreipia skaitytoją prie išvados, kad pats žmogus gali atpirkti savo nuodėmes ir būti išgelbėtas. Nepaisant to, Werfelis savo romanuose nuolat grįžta prie Dievo įvaizdžio. Paskutinis romanas religine tema buvo jo knyga „Bernadetų dainos“, parašytas 1941 metais.

Autoriaus religines nuostatas galima išvelgti visame jo kūrybiniame kelyje. Werfelis apibūdina galingą Dievą, sprendžiantį žmonių likimus, ir silpną Dievą, atgailaujantį dėl savo trūkumų ir silpnumo. Viešpats rodo demoniškas savybes, atskleidžiančias žmogaus nuodėmes. Galiausiai, Dievo įvaizdį pakeičia „naujojo žmogaus“ įvaizdis, kuris sugeba išsigelbėti per atgailą. Werfelis sugrįžta prie tikėjimo Dievu ir žmogumi, gebančiu išsaugoti savo sielos skautumą pilname žiaurumo ir neteisybės pasaulyje.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** Dievas, ekspresionizmas, Werfelis, tikėjimas, religiniai motyvai, judaizmas, austrų literatūra.

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