

RELATIONS BETWEEN THE RATIONAL AND THE MYSTICAL IN SOME WORKS OF LAZAR GULKOWITSCH

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Abstract. The article gives a brief introduction to the life of the outstanding scholar Lazar Gulkowitsch who in the 1920s studied in Königsberg and Leipzig and made his scholarly career in the 1930s in Leipzig and Tartu. One of the main topics in the works of Gulkowitsch, starting already with his doctoral thesis was dealing with the relations between the rational and the mystical in culture, especially in the Jewish thought. He has managed to deal with the rational elements and nature of manifestations of Jewish religion like Kabbalism, Hasidism or Zaddikism. He was convinced that it lies in the nature of religion to define the indefinable, to try to explain the irrational and to meet the limits of the rational. While the great systems of Jewish thought are handled as religious, i.e. manifestations of the mystical, Gulkowitsch tries to show their rational character. These teachings try to build a logical system of doctrines, but they are aware of their limits, too. The background of his ideas can be explained by the crucial influence of his studies in Königsberg and Leipzig.

Keywords: Lazar Gulkowitsch, Jewish Studies, University of Tartu, Hasidism, religion, Judaism, rationalism, mystical

1. Some remarks on the life of Lazar Gulkowitsch

In the 1920s, the Jewish scholar Lazar Gulkowitsch studied in Königsberg and Leipzig and made his scholarly career in the fields of philology, religious studies and philosophy in the 1930s in Leipzig and especially at the University of Tartu. His death in 1941, at the time of the Nazi occupation in Estonia, interrupted a promising philological and philosophical work. Although some of his publications had received response from important Jewish and German academics already in the 1930s, his work and life in the following decades until today is known only to a few specialists.

The university archives in Leipzig and Tartu have already been studied in the 1990s, basic facts about his life clarified.¹ The results so far could already allow updating and correcting the articles in reference works², but a lot of details wait for additional studies. Furthermore, Gulkowitsch's work as a whole, among it many eminent publications from the Tartu-period, is worthy of analysis and re-evaluation.³ Due to unfavorable circumstances – a remote European university and a complicated period of time – not even half of his publications is known in the world and the most relevant works need to be re-published.⁴ If the later research on Hasidism has been characterized to have been “nothing but a footnote to the Buber-Scholem controversy” (Hallamish 1993:326), it should be asked, whether Gulkowitsch, with the different proviso, would have had an impact on this research.

Gulkowitsch was born 20.12.1899⁵ in Žirin (Byelorussia), studied at the famous Talmudic school in Mir and graduated from the high school in Nikolajev (Ukraine) during World War I. After the evacuation to Wirballen (Virbālis in Lithuanian) and an episodic job as a director of a Hebrew folk-school, he started his medical studies at the Königsberg University in 1919. But from the very beginning, his real interest lay in philosophy, philology and religion, so he reached his doctoral promotion in 1922 in philosophy. He obtained crucial impetus from Kantian philosopher Albert Dieterich Goedeckemeyer, Old Testament scholar Max Löhr and Jewish scholar Felix Perles. Gulkowitsch's rationalistic attitude, high respect for thorough philological work and his idea of a special chair for the Jewish studies can definitely be seen in the context of his Königsberg-period.⁶ According to our thesis, this period cannot be underestimated in regard to the formation of Gulkowitsch's specific view up to his latest works.

Already in 1924, Gulkowitsch took over the lectureship in Hebrew, Aramaic and Talmudic studies at the University of Leipzig. As a disciple and colleague of scholars like August Fischer, Heinrich Zimmern, Benno Landsberger, Georg Steindorff, Joachim Wach, Theodor Litt etc., he obtained his habilitation⁷ and

¹ As it is known so far, there exist only some studies and overviews dealing with his life and work: Hoyer 1994, Lindroos 1994 and 1999, Schor 2000b. The results of the studies of the author of this article on Gulkowitsch and his chair will be published in *Judaica. Beiträge zum Verstehen des Judentums* soon.

² Until now only one reference article on Gulkowitsch, relatively free of erroneous data, can be mentioned: Schor 2000a.

³ Only two attempts, made by Henry Wassermann (1998, 2003), can be referred to. However, those deal only with the early works and can be characterized merely as highly polemic (cf. Petersen 2004).

⁴ The research in the most important library-catalogs and reference books has shown that the knowledge of even the number of Gulkowitsch's late works in the world is very fragmentary.

⁵ So according to the data in the documents in Tartu (EHA 2100-2-164:11-12,145 etc.), in most reference works the date of birth is 20.12.1898.

⁶ On the idea of the chair, its background and Perles's role see Wilhelm 1967. Cf. also Schüler-Springorum 1996, esp. p. 221.

⁷ His thesis (1927a) seems to be his best known work in the world.

became extraordinary Professor for the late Judaism in 1932. Two occasions brought Gulkowitsch to Estonia in 1934: in the year 1933, Jewish scholars were dismissed from the German universities and in Tartu, the four-year process of founding a special chair for Jewish studies at the philosophical faculty of the university by a small group of enthusiastic Jews was coming to a victorious end. Gulkowitsch held this chair – unique in the whole Europe – for over six years (1934–1940) and, in modest conditions, achieved remarkable success.⁸ Gulkowitsch can be seen as one of the few East-European Jews, “denen es durch intellektuelle und moralische Energie gelungen ist, den Weg von ostjüdischer Erziehung zu europäischer Wissenschaft ohne inneren Bruch zu vollziehen”.⁹ He was executed in August 1941 by the Nazis in Tartu, only some months after his chair was closed by the Soviet authorities.

2. Most important works dealing with the rational and the mystical in the Jewish religion and culture

We have mentioned Gulkowitsch’s special rationalistic and philological heritage from Königsberg. One of the main topics of his works, starting already with his doctoral thesis *Wesen und Entstehung der Qabbala*, presented in 1922 in Königsberg, published in Berlin (1927b), dealt with the rational in culture, especially in Jewish thought, even in mystical thought.¹⁰

Among numerous publications of Gulkowitsch, the most relevant work for our study, at the same time his *venia legendi* in Leipzig in 1932, bears the title *Rationale und mystische Elemente in der jüdischen Lehre*, printed later in Tartu (1935/36a). This title tries to outline the development of rational and mystical aspects in relation to one another or, more precisely, waves of intense religiosity free from systematization and of rationality from the first Old Testament prophets through the whole Jewish history until Judaism of the 1930s.

The dissatisfaction with the study of Hasidism in his time¹¹ led Gulkowitsch to a continuous involvement in this phenomenon up to his last days. With his habilitation, there begins the series of works on Hasidism. In spite of the fact that the most famous is only the first one – *Der Hasidismus religions-wissenschaftlich untersucht* (1927a) – three of his late works can be named here, a trilogy, which

⁸ It has to be mentioned that the knowledge about this chair and this way of reaching a degree in Jewish Studies is quite modest both in Estonia and in the rest of the world. Furthermore, to the background of the European politics in the 1930s, the fact that during the whole period, the lectures and seminars were held in German and Hebrew, underlines once more the uniqueness of the chair.

⁹ See Hans Heinrich Schaeder in the recommendation for the University of Tartu (EHA 2100-2-164:34).

¹⁰ Unfortunately I have not managed to obtain his short article “Die Qabbala als rationales System” (*Der Morgen*, 2, 1926, 272–280, as given by Wassermann (1998:14)).

¹¹ Cf. his critical summary of the research history (1927a:64–69).

cannot be overlooked in this context. In the years 1938–1940 in Tartu, Gulkowitsch published three highly integrated works *Die Grundgedanken des Chassidismus als Quelle seines Schicksals* (1938/40), *Das kulturhistorische Bild des Chassidismus* (1938/39), and *Der Chassidismus als kulturphilosophisches Problem* (1940). In the earliest publication, Gulkowitsch examines the idea which Hasidism tries to translate into reality. The synthesis of the idea and of the reality fulfilled for only a short historical moment, but can form for us the basis for the analysis of the main characteristics of Hasidism or Judaism (1938/40:10). The second work outlines the principles of the language and the methods of Hasidic exegesis and the way of looking at Hasidism as a cultural-historical phenomenon. By that means, Gulkowitsch declares the focal point of Hasidic train of thought the idea of God, uniformity of God and the world, an idea which forms doctrine and life (1938/39:7,100). The third publication deals with Hasidism as the central moment in the cultural history which allows inquiring into culture in general. In this work, the position of Hasidism in the sociological structure of its time and the significance of the Zaddikism in the framework of Hasidism is discussed. The recurrence of the reflections on the mystical and the rational in two of these publications should be noted.¹²

3. The main characteristics of Gulkowitsch's approach and its background

During the 16 years of his scholarly work, Gulkowitsch dealt with the rational elements and nature of the manifestations of Jewish religion like Kabbalism or Hasidism. He has been blamed for a tendentious view, i.e. exaggerated rational attitude towards Jewish phenomena already in the 1920s, a bit later, in 1941, by Gershom Scholem (1995:327),¹³ or also recently, e.g. by Henry Wasserman.¹⁴ This criticism may, in my opinion, be derived from the knowledge of Gulkowitsch's early works alone, which indeed underline the rationality of numerous Jewish phenomena and are rational in their method as well. But knowledge of his late works would help to clarify the picture. Gulkowitsch's approach can by no means be described as unbalanced: the impression conveyed already by his scientific credo characterizes the ideal of the most serious analysis.¹⁵ Furthermore, his idea of the continuum of mental and religious development, mixed with the idea of oscillation between the two opposites, rational and mystical, ideal and real, allow a very unified and sound picture of this development. In addition, his balanced –

¹² Cf. especially the chapter “Das mystische Moment im Chassidismus als allgemeines Fluidum” in his last work (1940:32–37).

¹³ On Scholem and his way of handling the religious phenomena, see Hamacher 1999.

¹⁴ Wassermann 1998, especially p. 15. However, his criticism is based mostly on the view of G. Scholem.

¹⁵ Apart from Gulkowitsch's works, his letter to Isaak Heinemann from 1936 (MRBD of TUL 47:3) and his *Forschungsprogramm*, written in 1938 in Tartu (MRBD of TUL 47:11), demonstrate this ideal at its best.

although sometimes poetic – language never allows for absolute categorization, but uses only relative terms.

At first, we have to characterize the way of handling the religious phenomena in Judaism. Gulkowitsch was convinced that it lay in the nature of religion to define the indefinable, to try to explain the irrational and to meet the limits of the rational. While the great systems of Jewish thought are handled as religious, i.e. manifestations of the mystical, Gulkowitsch tries to show their rational character. These teachings try to build a logical system of doctrines, at the same time being aware of their limits, too. For an Old Testament scholar, the best evidence would be the primary position, extent and authoritativeness of legislative parts of the Old Testament, or the rational forming of highly religious, irrational message of the Old Testament prophets, or the efficacy or pragmatic way of handling, e.g. of the creation.

For Gulkowitsch, the history of the Jewish thought seems to be a swinging (oscillation) of some Jewish basic ideas between or within the rational and the mystical way of approach. The scheme can be presented on the basis of his work *Rationale und mystische Elemente in der jüdischen Lehre* as follows. The personalities and schools are to be divided into four groups: 1) the more or less mystical, like the prophets of the Old Testament, Pharisees, those dealing with Haggada, Zohar, Kabbala, etc., or 2) the more or less rational, like “religious system” beginning with Moses, Sadducees, those dealing with Halakha, Mendelssohn, etc.; then 3) those who can in ingenious way connect both approaches, the deepness of the mystical insight and the rational method like, in a sense, the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, Philo and Sa’adjā, but certainly the school of ‘Aqībā¹⁶, Maimonides¹⁷, and Hasidism, etc., and 4) their opposite, those who completely lose the orientation like the authors of later Haggada-collections, the Midrāshīm.¹⁸ In addition, there exist movements which can be described as a protest against both approaches, but which in spite of this are derived from one or another or even undertake an evolution from one to another, like Karaim (from mystical beginnings to rational final form) (1935/36a:16).

The described scheme from *Rationale und mystische Elemente in der jüdischen Lehre* is quite known to the specialists also from Gulkowitsch’s earlier works. The often misunderstood rational approach and the obvious emphasizing of rational elements in the religious movements has been mentioned or briefly argued by other scholars as well. But for Gulkowitsch, apart from the contrast or synthesis of the mystical and the rational, there exists another way of describing the history of Jewish thought, namely the way of “Idee und Leben”¹⁹, the contradiction or synthesis of the idea and the real life, doctrine and reality. On this ground, Gulko-

¹⁶ In *Rationale und mystische Elemente in der jüdischen Lehre*, Gulkowitsch dedicates two pages to ‘Aqībā (1935/36a:12–14).

¹⁷ On Maimonides, Gulkowitsch has reflected in a special work (1935/36b).

¹⁸ Cf. e.g. the valuation: “Irrgarten, in dem die Saat des ‘Aqībā überwuchert wurde von dem krausen Sagenschatz des damaligen Vorderasiens” (1935/36a:15).

¹⁹ So the subtitle of *Die Grundgedanken des Chassidismus als Quelle seines Schicksals* (1938/40).

witsch describes again a continuum of development in the Jewish religion, also in Christianity (or religion in general). Once more, Gulkowitsch describes the development as an oscillation between the idea and the reality or participation in both simultaneously. All of the religious movements somehow try to put the idea into life, to live the idea.²⁰ Some movements succeed in it in some areas, like the religion of the Old Testament prophets in the politics and cult, or the Pharisees and Rabbis in the everyday life (1938/40:6). On the contrary, there are movements which let life dominate idea and therefore sooner or later fail as religious phenomena. But only a few succeed to complete the development and to live in the total light of the idea and thereby to cover all the areas of mental and real life. Such example in the Jewish history is Hasidism where theory and practice, idea and real life became merged in a way very rare in the world history – and this in spite of the share of the mystical or the rational in it. It is quite typical of Gulkowitsch that the period, which until him was handled as the fall of Hasidism because of its solely practical image without any theoretical discussions or leading personalities, is described by Gulkowitsch as the most relevant point of inner development for Hasidism. It is in this period that Hasidism lives the idea most intensely.

For Gulkowitsch, the starting point for the analysis of Hasidism is its paradoxical way of being a uniform religious movement including strictly opposite religious manifestations. It has not been a problem for Hasidic movement to use mystically shaped kabbalistic or more rational Talmudic methods side by side. The Hasidism could simultaneously use magic, ecstatic forms of religion, and rational analysis. For Gulkowitsch, the answer lies in the fact that all these manifestations were measured only by the focus or centre of the Hasidic thought – the idea of God. Thus, the opposite manifestations did not disturb the unity of Hasidism; they were all radials having their starting point in the idea of God and ending in very different phenomena (1938/40:11–40).

Consequently, Gulkowitsch handles history as the history of one or more ideas.²¹ Every development is continuous including the continuum of ideas. Furthermore, history is always the history of spirit which actualizes itself in the world in very different ways. Thus for example the concept of God or God himself in many religions is actualized in different ways.

Metaphysically seen, the concept is uniform, historically seen, the culture is uniform. Such a system following great Jewish and German philosophers in a very distinguished manner was always expressly presented by Gulkowitsch as the premise of his work. As to the method of approach of this totality, he added that it is possible only through the research concentrated on special, sometimes very limited subjects.

²⁰ Thus, Gulkowitsch neglects the impact of the pietistic mentality on Hasidism, because it is the Godly itself which manifests in Hasidic thought and is not borrowed from somewhere outside, cf. Gulkowitsch 1938/40:18, and n. 1.

²¹ Cf. the title of one of Gulkowitsch's last lectures and of the one held in Cambridge in English [1939].

As we have seen, the majority of the reflections above took place on theoretical ground. In fact, it seems to be a question of method. The most relevant answer lies, in fact, in the way of explaining his method as deeply scholarly, and therefore rational. It is an old theological question: how to study religion. Can religion be understood only by mystics, by the mystical way or should it be studied, scrutinized, examined like any other phenomenon of human nature, i.e. by rationalists. The first way was undertaken by such relevant scholars as Rudolf Otto or Martin Buber already years before Gulkowitsch. Gulkowitsch had chosen the second way, like many of his colleagues in Königsberg and Leipzig. He systemized to the limit. Gulkowitsch was a rationalist and stuck to the tools he managed best. He was convinced that, before one can become a mystic, one has to reach the boundaries and explain the religious works and ideas and systems as far as possible as rational systems. After that, one can be a mystic with clear conscience; see the centre of all reflections, the focus of all radials. He was convinced that religion starts in the wordless mystical experience and it ends in the wordless mystics. But between these two extremes there lies the whole palette of religious manifestations, ideas, and systems up to the utmost rationalization.

Some remarks about the background of Gulkowitsch's ideas should be made. There is no doubt that his academic background can be explained by the crucial influence of his studies in Königsberg (Kantianism and Rationalism) and in Leipzig (thorough philological approach to the history of religion). Especially through his studies on Hasidism, we can locate Gulkowitsch's approach. He started his research in the prime of the study of Hasidism. Already at the end of the 1920s, there existed numerous important studies on this phenomenon and thereby many different directions were chosen.²² In the framework of Jewish studies, this question of direction, i.e. of method, has to be described as the real focus of academic discussions. Gulkowitsch's dissatisfaction has been already noted above. The discontent with the results of the research on Hasidism did not give rise to criticism, but rather the method.²³ We cannot overlook a certain contrast of scholarly approach of the philological and historical school of Leipzig and the mystically oriented school of Marburg (Rudolf Otto).²⁴ Here, Gulkowitsch explicitly preferred the school of Leipzig and made this approach the centre of his studies, both theoretical and practical.

As a relatively uniform phenomenon, Hasidism provides for a very good object for the study of religion or human culture in general. For that reason, Gulkowitsch dealt not only with the specific content or details of Hasidism, but to a great degree with the theoretical side of the phenomenon and its handling. How to reach the very being of Hasidism? How to describe its roots and effect? How to describe the relation between the idea and the reality in it, or the relation between the

²² On the discussion, see Hamacher 1999.

²³ Symptomatic is Gulkowitsch's (1927a:66) declaration on Martin Buber: "Da Martin Buber Dichter ist, der auch selbst zur Mystik neigt, erhält der Hasidismus in seiner Darstellung allzu geheimnisvolle Färbung und kommt das naturhaft Kindliche, das heiter Naive nicht so recht zur Betonung".

²⁴ On the history and character of the school of Leipzig, see Rudolph 1962.

mystical and the rational? How to outline the genuine and the alien in it? How to describe the inner dialectical development which every movement underlies? These are the questions relevant to Gulkowitsch. And the answers can only be theoretical and practical at the same time, rational and therefore completely responsible.

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