

MARIA KONOPNICKA IN SEARCH FOR HER OWN REFLECTION

(AN INTRODUCTION)

BY

DAMIAN MAKUCH

It is not easy to assemble the image of Maria Konopnicka. It has been broken down into fragments by her works, by incomplete analyses and by warped interpretations of her biography. It is a loose assimilation of facts glued together with ideological tape, which has consolidated for the reader into a stereotype for an amazingly long time. Hence, the question ‘Who was Konopnicka?’ requires quite some contemplation on who she truly was - but for whom? This Polish writer looked into many mirrors, searching for her own reflection throughout her life.

Finding the facts just by using these fleeting reflections is a tricky task. Maria Wasiłowska was born 1842 into a landowning family in the northeast of Poland. When she lost her mother at the age of 12, her strict and religious father took over her upbringing. Her home schooling was supplemented by a private girls’ boarding school in Warsaw, while her autodidactic development continued even when she was a wife and a mother to her six children by Jarosław Konopnicki (whom she married in 1862). The events reconstructed through the author’s own narrative are considerably more varied – they will have to fit into the various imaginary roles that the poet from time to time considered to be her own.

The first of these imagined roles explains the circumstances of her relatively late début as a writer. The future Nobel Prize winner Henryk Sienkiewicz’s enthusiastic review of Konopnicka’s poem *In the Mountains* resulted in such an awakening from her dull provincial life that she left her husband in 1876 and went to Warsaw with her children to pursue a literary career. Far from his home country, Sienkiewicz imagined Konopnicka as a

charming debutante singing patriotic and wistful songs. This life-hardened woman took this reflection as her own. From this time forward, she not only portrayed herself in her biographical statements as younger than she was, but also started to bear an uncanny resemblance to rural girls on countless portraits.

Konopnicka's poems struck a chord with the Positivists, a social and literary movement that had been awaiting since considerable time a standard bearer who would sing about the future glory of an era of work and progress. Her rapprochement with this developing cultural movement was assured by the "dramatic fragments" from one of the first anthologies she had written during the first ten years of her career, titled *From the Past*, where she described the conflict between Church and academics but also, as is widely recognized today, by some novels dealing mostly with problems of poverty (including, for example, *Smoke* and *Our Hack*). Praised for her maturity, rationality and outright "masculine" poetic style, Konopnicka became the "bard of positivism," which, on a symbolic level, celebrated her forty-year jubilee as a writer in 1902. It also had another effect: she received, as a "gift from the nation", a mansion in Żarnowiec. In this instance, the writer assumed the role placed upon her: she underwent a metamorphosis from talkative 'country girl' to mature matron, wapped peasant beads for dignified spectacles, and wistful folk pieces for an anachronistic form of romantic songs.

Both these personas influenced the established reception of Konopnicka's work. Moreover, the recognition of her work by a socialist environment and its vulgar didactic interpretation in the spirit of a Marxist history of literature during the era of the Peoples' Republic of Poland led to a situation where Konopnicka appeared stereotypically as the symbol of the provinces, "worn thoughts, monotonous forms, parochial ideas that the world has long since ceased to care about".¹

¹ T. Budrewicz, cited in L. Magnone, *Maria Konopnicka. Mirrors and Symptoms*. Gdansk: Slowo / Terytoria Obraz, 2011, p.5.

The questioning of the reflections of the author of *Rota*, a song proposed for the national anthem after Poland gained independence following World War I, brought on a critical analysis of her thus-far overlooked works, along with an attempt by Lena Magnone to look at her private life in her monograph “*Maria Konopnicka, Mirrors and Symptoms.*” Magnone notes that, in the patriarchal public discourse of the 19th century, there were only two roles a woman was allowed to assume: she could either be what men expected her to be (that is, the embodiment of Sienkiewicz’s romantic vision) or try to become a “man” herself (that was, to fulfill the vision of the positivists). This strictly feminist dilemma coincided with a strategy characteristic for positivist projects that relied on supporting elements of the opposition with the ideology of the time. This resulted in the creation of a malignant symptom and a return to the status of a victim of repression.

In Konopnicka’s case, her success at preaching with a “male” voice was in stark contrast to the complete fiasco of her relationship with her daughters: the youngest, Laura and the oldest Helena. The former, incredibly beautiful and intelligent, wanted to become an actress. Konopnicka worried about the effect this would have on her daughter’s reputation. She attempted unsuccessfully to prevent her divorce from Stanisław Pytliński. She also unsuccessfully attempted to frustrate Laura’s plans and did not shy away from using her own position to have the doors of leading theatres closed to her daughter - who nonetheless became a well-known actress. Her complete lack of understanding of Laura was particularly confusing in the context of her own separation from her husband and departure to Warsaw.

Her relations with Helena were even more dramatic. Her eldest daughter became pregnant by an unknown man. Her decline in social standing led to several thefts occurring in residences where she was taken in as a teacher. Diagnosed as a kleptomaniac and suffering from hysteria, she began a ‘pilgrimage’ around various clinics from which she ran away, returning each time to her mother. Trying to trigger any sort of response from Konopnicka, Helena did not even shy away from the threat of suicide. The scandals of the

daughter went hand in hand with a complete lack of understanding from the mother's side. Konopnicka tried to isolate herself from her daughter, throwing the responsibility for her fate on her failed husband. On the one hand, she tried to explain Helena's behaviour using her illness as an excuse; on the other, she thought that her daughter brought these attacks on herself, and that by destroying her own reputation she was being spiteful towards her mother. At one point, Helena disappeared from her mother's letters. From that moment, whenever Konopnicka mentioned her children, even those who had passed away, she no longer listed her ill daughter among them.

In *Letters to Sons and Daughters* (1888-1910) recently compiled by Lena Magnone² it is apparent that strained family relations are a consequence of constraints that the author imposed on herself. Konopnicka did not understand her daughters' insanity, eroticism, unsettling beauty or desire for self-realisation, in other words: their confident femininity. Konopnicka, having been brought up by her father, aligned herself with a masculine discourse of that era and used so called strategic mimicry, conforming to the order of patriarchal requirements. This could never succeed as "positivists, who turned to their fathers, reproached their mothers, because the latter were too feminine and accused them of denying their femininity."³ Konopnicka's relationship with Laura and Helena became a metaphorical symptom of this denial.

From this perspective, the author's creativity takes on a completely different meaning. It turns out that amongst her literary achievements, there are no works in which traces of her personal experiences would not be noticeable. The modern feminine novella (a form that lends itself to experimentation) is the complete opposite of the anachronistic and masculine poetry promoted at her time. As Lena Magnone notices, the literary innovation of Konopnicka emerges from the development of the feminine act of communication.

² Maria Konopnicka. *Listy do synów i córek* [*Letters to Sons and Daughters*], edited and prefaced by Lena Magnone, Warsaw – Institute of Literary Studies at Polish Academy of Sciences; Żarnowiec – Maria Konopnicka Museum, Warsaw 2010.

³ Lena Magnone, *Maria Konopnicka. Mirrors and Symptoms*, op.cit., s.173.

Accordingly, the emphatic writer used her voice to relate, rather than commit to writing, the fate of the rural female protagonist, as if confiding it to her female reader individually. The distance between transmitter and receiver is narrowed with the help of the poet's intimate confession that excludes paternalism or didactic ambitions characteristic of literature at the time. As a consequence, Konopnicka established a matrilineal relationship of communication in literature based on the principle of secret confessions - a relationship that she was regrettably unable to develop in her own life.

The theme of her novels fits in nicely with this mode of communication. Konopnicka dealt with relationships between mother and daughter (*Miss Florentyna*) and mother and son (*Mrs Urban, Smoke*). She attempted to describe female insanity (in her series *Behind Bars* and *Anusia*) and even stepped into the dark world of female eroticism (*Józefowa, Krysta*). The themes of motherhood and sexuality became entrenched in the work of this Polish writer who partly stepped into the role of becoming a hostage of mass imagination, trying to put the experiences of women into words, fascinating and unnerving at the same time.

In contrast to the glimmering triumph of realism – which deceived with its “truthfulness”, but really masked the trauma caused by reality, trying to silence the unconscious – the language of the author of *Rota* sidestepped this problem. Although speaking means to enter into the paternal order of symbolism, the physical experience of the sexes prior to discourse shone through the words. Lena Magnone claims that this happens with the use of physical description and the use of rhythmic elements: “female literature of the era of positivism is an attempt to mask the reality of femininity – the trauma of breaking with one's mother. The return of the real existence, feminine and motherly, is manifested through singing, music and the text's rhythm.”⁴ Analysis of the verses of her poems shows that the rhythm, in particular, opens the realm for freedom and

⁴ Ibid. p.282.

what is natural, submerged in the sensual side of language. She exposes the sensual side of language, allowing bodily pleasure unmediated by what is characteristic and conventional.

Konopnicka found opportunity for self-realization not only in her own work. When Warsaw was bustling with gossip about Helena, in 1890 Konopnicka decided to leave the city she had come to detest and set out on what would become a 20 year voyage across Europe. The experience of travel was refreshing for her. Public and familial mirrors cracked and the gaps revealed a space in which she could confront her own existence. Her friend Maria Dulębianka, 20 years her junior, a well-known painter and active feminist, accompanied her in her travels. It is Dulębianka, not Konopnicka's husband Jarosław, who accompanied the poet to various celebrations (e.g. in her literary jubilee in 1902). It appears that, with Dulębianka, Konopnicka finally found an alternative, non-oppressive form of human contact.

Travel allowed the poet a great break, but also led her to return to "what before had to be abandoned: femininity, insanity, beauty, the delight at the prospect of life."⁵ An account of these experiences may be found in a small anthology of poems (*Italia*) and in a series of novels *On the Norman Coast*. The sensual excitement, throbbing with erotica, ceases to be threatening with its murky influence. The delight at nature, in particular at the sea as an elemental creation of women, intertwines in Konopnicka's poetry with a description of works of art. The paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites described in her cycle *Madonna* take on simplicity and severity reminiscent of rustic provenance. Her new use of simple folk song based on parallelisms of form where ekphrasis is contained expresses characteristics of centuries-long search for authentic Polish style and is not the result of provincial language or inappropriate stylization.

Konopnicka tried to give whatever aspect of folklore a kind of universal status. These collections have been least analyzed to date, but they contain within them the seed

⁵ Ibid. p.364.

and spirit of modernism. Konopnicka tackled the problem of religiousness, which at the start of her career aroused great controversy in conservative circles. She recognizes the experience of transcendence outside the boundaries of the Catholic Church as an institution, convinced of the continued evolution of dogmas, as she searched for God predominantly in nature. Her reflections on the spirit of modern religion were accompanied by an attempt to reevaluate the romantic tradition in such a way so that it became attractive to a person living at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Despite having created her own space, Konopnicka never stopped identifying with the reflection of her by the mirror of the nation. More and more often, she stepped into the anachronistic role of a bard. That which was individual, novel and feminine remains hidden, exposing a caricature of people's imagination that allowed her continued participation in the public sphere.

Maria Konopnicka died in 1910 in Lviv. Only 100 years after her death, Lena Magnone placed a mirror in front of her, allowing her fragmented image to merge into one unified picture.

(Translated from Polish by Inka Roszkowska and Cecylia Pytel, reviewed by Joanna Diane Caytas)

Biographical notes:

Damian Włodzimierz Makuch (b. 1988), Ph.D., researcher in Polish Studies at the University of Warsaw.

Lena Magnone, b. 1980, author of the monograph on Maria Konopnicka (*Maria Konopnicka. Lustra i symptomy* [*Maria Konopnicka: Mirrors and Symptoms*], Gdańsk: Słowo / Terytoria Obraz 2011) and Maria Konopnicka, *Listy do synów i córek* [*Letters to sons and daughters*], edited and prefaced by Lena Magnone, Warsaw – Institute of Literary Studies at Polish Academy of Sciences; Żarnowiec – Maria Konopnicka Museum, Warsaw 2010.