The image of John Hus in Maria Konopnicka’s poetry

Abstract:
The study provides an outline of interpretation of Maria Konopnicka’s poem, which was inspired by a painting by Václav Brožík Mistr Jan Hus před koncilem kostnickým (1883). The poem employs Christian imagery (swan, dove, myrrh), biblical paraphrases of St. Paul’s and Christ’s words. Such allusions suggest the poetess’s deep artistic intention and reveal the considerable literary value of the poem. The article is the completed version of a paper which was delivered at the XXIX International Comeniological Colloquium in Uhersky Brod Hus, Komenský a česká reformace 15. – 16. října 2014.

Keywords: John Hus, Maria Konopnicka, Václav Brožík, Poetry

This paper presents an attempt to analyze and interpret the poem titled John Hus. In front of the Brožík picture by Maria Konopnicka. The work has been the subject of interest before. Tadeusz Budrewicz has given the poem a thorough analysis1. The researcher performed a detailed explication of the literary text, particularly focusing on the stages of how the work was emerging and on its historical contexts. It is worth mentioning that the poem was translated into the Czech language2.

Konopnicka’s text was inspired by Václav Brožík (1851-1901), whose paintings were widely exhibited, and works of art came into prominence and found approval. It could be easy to explain why Hussite subject matter was so popular in the nineteenth century in Poland, which did not exist then. The reason was that the subject reminded Polish people of the Czech struggle for freedom3. On the other hand, the critics’ enthusiasm stood in opposition to the impersonal relation between the Catholic Church and the exposed subject matter. Karol Górski wrote that in the second half of the nineteenth century

1 T. Budrewicz: Konopnicka. Szkice historyczno-literackie. Kraków 2000, pp. 91-104
2 Ibidem, p. 91.
on the former Polish land “[...] positivism and consistent Catholicism appeared”\textsuperscript{4}, and the close of the century brought the renewal of the Catholic movement. It is evident that Brožík’s picture must have provoked various emotions in the context of the Catholic renewal and it aroused controversies, particularly among Catholic priests\textsuperscript{5}.

Some variants and forms of the text were composed and persuasively discussed by Tadeusz Budrewicz. The historian of literature put the poem on the list of historical and cultural events. He also advanced a ‘genetic’ interpretation of the poem’s meaning. Nowadays, such a reading– indeed historically useful – cannot satisfy the curiosity of research. Budrewicz’s reading of the poem renders it a thing of minor literary importance. In that instance, we are not looking at a work of literature, but at a random rhyming piece of writing\textsuperscript{6}.

From the genealogical point of view, Maria Konopnicka’ lyric titled \textit{John Hus. In front of the Brožík’s picture} is a short poem which was inspired by the Czech painter\textsuperscript{7}. It is difficult to recognize the text to be an ekphrasis so long as it offers little more than a comment on the art of painting. In the first part of the work, the poetess creates

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{4}K. Górski: \textit{Zarys dziejów duchowości w Polsce}. Kraków 1986, p. 277.
\item \textsuperscript{5}T. Budrewicz, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 94.
\item \textsuperscript{6}M. Szypowska: \textit{Konopnicka jakiej nie znamy}. Poznań 2014, s. 167.
\item \textsuperscript{7}M. Konopnicka: \textit{Poezje}. Warszawa 1951, t. 1, pp. 222-226.
\end{itemize}
a statement of Hus himself. The second part shows the way in which the picture was received the public who came to see the exhibition. Therefore, it is not an accurate description of the painting, yet a free poetic variation on the subject of conviction and immolation of the Czech hero.

In the first part, the author concentrates especially on the reformer himself, trying to express his feelings and thoughts when he appeared before the court. At the same time, she is eager to present a powerful fight between spirits. In the poem Konopnicka shows the monumentality of the spiritual battle, which Hus conducts against violence, intrigue and falsehood.

— Stoję przed wami i milczę. O sędzie,
  Wy nie jesteście dla mnie sądem Boga!

The hero of the poem appears as a prophet and he has the traits of Christ Himself, but also some features of Prometheus. The emphatic silence of the Czech priest at the beginning of the poem is transformed into a stentorian call: ‘I am standing in front of you and I am silent. Oh! Judges, / you are not the court of God for me!’ (line 1-2). It is a poetic paradox that the hero’s silence is filled with loud words that are both full of sorrow and prophetic energy.

Hus in his poetic vision (to some extent in Brožík’s vision, too) confronts his prosecutors with dignity. He points at the Supreme Court that is led by God Himself. Only God can judge the hero. In his prophetic dream, Hus notices the burning stake and a crowd that execrates him. He feels lonely and completely deprived of human support. The poetess presents martyrdom and the hero’s death as a picture of “bloodied swans” (line 7), which are the symbol of immortality.

Physiologus
and pain. It is interesting that Konopnicka elided that symbolism, even though it was widespread in the Middle Ages, and connected with another bird – the pelican. The latter bird was the symbol of Jesus. The pelican that feeds its nestlings on its blood meant parental devotion and readiness for sacrifice. It is also worth mentioning that the swan as a symbol of poetic inspiration is more associated with ancient and Renaissance traditions. It is possible that at a symbolic level a conflict between old and new, or between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, is revealed in the poem

In the further fragments of the first part of the poem, the hero asks where his defence is. There is nobody who could stand up for the man condemned to death at the moment of his ordeal. Christ, who was also dying in silence and was carrying “the crown of shame”, remains the only reference (line 15).

Hus in Konopnicka’s poem prophesies a sublunary triumph of “Roman masters” (line 18). Finally, the hero has to experience silence like Prometheus in one of Aeschylus’s tragedy. In the light of Konopnicka’s poem, Hus’s only guilt was his desire for freedom and for the

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“The Physiologus says of the pelican that it of all birds loves its young the most, but when the chicks grow and begin to strike their parents in the face, the parents grow angry and strike back, killing their young. After three days the mother feels great remorse, and tearing open her own breast she bathes the dead chicks in her blood and restores them to life. The Epiphanius version is the same, except that the mother pelican is said to kill her young by her excessive kisses. The interpretation is that we have struck our “parent” (God) with our sin, which has doomed us, but Christ’s blood can revive us” - http://spcoll.library.uvic.ca/Digit/physiologum/animal/pelican.htm
sovereignty of spirit. The spirit of freedom and truth has its source in Christ, that is why the intrepid hero goes under Its sign – a cross. At his martyr's death, the priest speaks using Saint Paul's words, who compared human life to a competition: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” (2 Tim 4,6). However, we may add that in the letter Saint Paul also wrote about his loneliness at the time of his ordeal.

In the successive parts of the poem, Hus prophesies the fall of the country. He compares himself to a dove that flies above the burning building, where there is its nest. It is also proper to add that a dove in culture is, among others, a synonym of spirit in general, spiritual purity and a message from God, The bird in the poem takes on precisely that meaning. In the impassioned apostrophe, the hero cries “My country!”, and shows important historic events, such as the battle of the White Mountain, periods of persecution and forced migration of many Czech people. However, hope for freedom emerges: "My people – will emerge!” – the Christian reformer shouts.

Ojczyzno moja! Już idą momenty
I ostateczne tych dni rozwiązanie...
Od Białej Góry gdzieś słyszę tętenty
I od Taboru bojowych surm granie...
Lud mój okuty, zabity, przeklęty...
Lecz Ty wyciągasz prawicę, o Panie!
Ty Bóg żyjących i wolnych... Ty święty!
Mój lud – powstanie!
(p. 224)

Reconciled with his fate, he turns himself into the executioner – the Roman bishop. He does not want to buy his life by succumbing to human nature and the fear of death. He wants, however, to be a victim like a bundle of myrrh (a symbol of suffering and sacrifice), which exudes aroma when it is heated during a church service.

Pójdę – i życia zaparciem nie kupię...
Jak wiązka mirry, tak spłonę wam cichy,
A stos mój dymy odrzuci wam trupie
Na ten świat lichy
(p. 224)

In the end, the hero dies as Christ did, drinking his own bitter cup of sorrow (an allusion to the Jesus's prayer in Gethsemane). He shouts after all – “It's me I'm a spirit ... I'm alive!”

In the second part of the poem, the poetess describes reactions of some people who have come to see Brožik’s picture. She underlines
that the events took place a long time ago, which is demonstrated by signs of time passing and wisdom: ashes, rotten wood and decaying stuff.

...Kiedy to było? Ha! Dawno już temu!
W starym, gotyckim, przysłoniętym dziś chórze
Wyblakły w szybach anioły i róże,
A słońce, kołu podobne złotemu,
Już się nie kładzie na białym marmurze...
To już tak dawno, tak dawno już temu!
(p. 225)

The crowd who are forcing their way and the people who are glad to observe the painting from the past provoke the poetess's reflections and some questions. Could people hear the Hussite “moan of the spirit”? Konopnicka, however, holds off the atmosphere of pathos, indicating only human curiosity. Religious disputes are not so momentous and they even “bore Rome”, the capital city of Christianity.

Ziemia nie rodzi stosów, jest jałową...
Sobory nudzą Rzym, daję wam słowo!
Więc bez obawy bądźcie, dobrzy ludzie!
A gdyby nawet ten zbór miał tu ożyć,
Choćby wstał biskup, co kłatwą dotyka,
Ja wam giełt daję – nie chciejcie się trwożyć!
Dziś Europa już nie jest tak dzika...
Możecie odejść i spać się położyć:
Choćby stos gorzał – skąd wziąć męczennika?
(p. 226)

Even if Hus’s spirit comes back to life, it will be unable to affect the inhabitants in Europe. The poetess insists that Europe is not so wild any more. The culminating point in the poem is deeply ironic. There are no people who will willingly sacrifice their lives for ideas. Despite the fact that the stake is burning, you cannot possibly find a martyr. It could even be related to the political situation in Central Europe, where some nations were deprived of their sovereignty and they could not afford to oppose their oppressors either spiritually or mentally.

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The poem titled John Hus. In front of the Brožík’s picture by Maria Konopnicka was mainly treated as an expression of “literary journalism”. Therefore, less attention was paid to some literary qualities that inform its semantic nuances. Here, we especially think of the symbolic meaning, paraphrases of the Bible, and the poetic tone.
Recently researchers have been more concentrated on the poem’s composition and its ideological meaning.

Studies show that Konopnicka efficiently builds her poetic argument by employing traditional symbolism (swan, dove, myrrh). Moreover, she weaves the biblical paraphrases of Saint Paul and Christ into the poem’s fabric. These qualities testify to Konopnicka’s deep artistic intentions and suggest the high literary value of the analyzed work.

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