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BARBARA STELINGOWSKA

Institute of Linguistics and Literary Studies

University of Siedlce

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7324-1452>

e-mail: barbara.stelingowska@uws.edu.pl

**“Image of the author” – Maria Komornicka/
Piotr Odmieniec Włast – in *Xięga poezji idyllicznej*
[*The Book of Idyllic Poetry*]¹**

**„Obraz autora” – Marii Komornickiej/
Piotra Odmieńca Własta – w *Xiędze poezji idyllicznej***

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Słowa kluczowe: Maria Komornicka, autor, obraz, podmiot liryczny, tekst

Abstract

This article attempts to reconstruct the “image of the author” perceived as a cognitive category. It is based on the interpretation of Maria Komornicka’s *Xięga poezji idyllicznej*, the last volume by the modernist poet. The image of the speaking subject that emerges from the texts is undefined and ambiguous. It hides behind masks, shapes and processes, constantly waiting for a change. Playing a confessional role, it becomes a source where the identity of Maria Komornicka/Piotr Odmieniec Włast may be found.

Maria Komornicka is interesting and certainly the most controversial among the Young Polish poets. A biography of the author of *Biesy* caused quite a sensation and stirred curiosity among readers, who expect a conclusive (or satisfactory) explanation of the reasons for the spectacular – to use Maria Janion’s phrasing – “liberation of the soul from a woman’s body” (Janion 1996: 249). The poet’s

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biography is usually conventionally divided into two parts overlapping with the “female” and “male” periods since, following Juliusz Słowacki, it may be said that Maria’s life “must [...] be split into two great halves”, though at the same time “in what grammar should the past be worded?” (Dernałowicz 1977: 77–78). This is how Maria Dernałowicz implicitly refers to the poet’s gender question, which draws the most interest from researchers.

This article attempts to reconstruct the “image of the author”, approached as a cognitive category. In his monograph on *Pan Tadeusz*, Kazimierz Wyka uses a term borrowed from the Russian linguist Viktor Vinogradov to observe in the chapter *Studia nad tekstem* that:

The concept and image of the author may be a certain generalising category in which individual features are obliterated; it may also be a certain individualising category in which the personal traits of a given maker of the work are highlighted (Wyka 1963: 331).

Wyka argues in favour of a historically understood theory of lyric, in which “the image of the author may be [...] a scholarly construct arising solely from the work and reducible to the work” (Wyka 1963: 336). Through their personal creation, the author is identified with the work, remaining a necessary medium for the interpretation of the text.

On the other hand, Janusz Sławiński’s methodological framework distinguishes three categories of the sender, who may be “the author understood biographically, the subject of creative activities and the speaking subject, the literary “I” (Sławiński 1974). According to the scholar, the author is a real person; the literary subject is an element in the structure of the work, while the “subject of creative activity” is situated between the author and the work. Still different conceptualisations of that category are suggested by Edward Balcerzan, Teresa Kostkiewiczowa or Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska. Stefan Sawicki, comparing various studies concerned with the category of the authorial image, notes that they are usually theoretical or methodological and, combining structuralist and semantic theories, allow for the personalist dimension as well (Sawicki 1977)².

² Ryszard Nycz notes that art, including literature, is “a unique cultural institution, self-sufficient and autonomous. It requires a particular type of attention, consisting in emotion-free contemplation, to which the subject trains themselves, assuming the position of a distanced, competent observer who approaches the work as independent, i.e. isolated from its context, and devoid of any ‘invested’, utilitarian connotations, because only such conditions ensure its correct reception” (Nycz 2012: 33).

What approach, then, should be adopted when reading the “image of the author” in *Xięga poezji idyllicznej* [*The Booke of Idyllic Poetry*]? (Komornicka 2023). The phenomenon that Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska called the “paradox of the author” seems to be an interesting and applicable solution because, as the researcher notes:

This paradox consists in the fact that, on the one hand, everything in the work has been brought into being by the author’s intention and action, that they are responsible for the meaning of every word, that they can present each sentence as theirs, and that they can make every character their spokesperson; on the other hand, they cannot be fully equated with any of their verbal embodiments, in any configuration of meaning, and always remain outside the substance of their utterance and their work (Okopień-Sławińska 1981: 43-44).

Polysemy opens up new interpretative avenues, which take into account historical, biographical, psychological, theoretical, methodological, semantic and contextual aspects. The reader can thus come closer to unravelling the mystery of Maria/Piotr’s spiritual transformation, but will they solve the existential secret of the person who, according to the critic and essayist Jan Marx, was a “cursed poet of that era” (Marx 1997: 428)? Or will they experience disappointment and disillusionment following that path, leaving it unsatisfied? Written by Komornicka in Grabów, *Xięga...* brings out and systematises a number of hitherto unknown authorial reflections, being simultaneously “a document of Destiny fulfilled”, of which Aniela Komornicka, Maria’s sister, spoke in a letter to Stanisław Pigoń dated 14 September 1960 (Pigoń 1964: 341–353).

The indeterminacy of the lyrical subject

Can the first-person “I”, which is at the heart of almost every poem by Maria Komornicka, be considered the poet’s *porte-parole*? The temptation to think so is great and can hardly be resisted. After all, if the author were presumed to be one and the same as the subject, it would solve the long-standing dilemma of researchers of the life and works of the author of *Czarne płomienie*, who have to decide whether to write about Maria or Piotr and therefore “about her” or “about him”. Thus, assuming that the place of the poet is taken by what Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska (Okopień-Sławińska 1985: 98-115) defines as the direct and first-person ‘I’ presented in the text, established in the convention of inner landscape, the aforementioned question posed by Komornicka’s distant cousin, Maria

Dernałowicz, namely “in what grammar should the past be worded” [i.e. Komornicka’s past – B.S.] (Dernałowicz 1985: 98–115) would be unfounded (Dernałowicz 1977: 75–78).

However, the ‘I’ in *Xięga...* dons a safe mask, revealing itself only as much as it wishes while maintaining a cognitive distance. It is often asexual, androgynous, childlike, and angelic. Elsewhere, it takes on the role of a son, a captive, an ascetic, a cloud, a “rhymester”, a “little Buddha”, an “embryo in an egg”, a “second-day creation”. Occasionally, one encounters deliberate “de-gendering” that stems from the unwillingness to align oneself with any gender and serves to evade defining it, manifesting in the child subject. Such disclosure of the lyrical subject does not facilitate vivisection, constant scrutiny, processing, observation or individualised analysis, while the search for gender identity involves various modalities: feminine, masculine, androgynous or consciously undefined.

Andrzej Z. Makowiecki drew attention to the personal components in the lyric, noting that:

Within the lyrical genre, the structure of the lyrical subject is quite peculiar. It speaks not only to reveal emotional states and interpretations of the world. The most salient feature of that lyric is its unprecedented directness and personhood, whereby the subject very often self-identifies as the creator (Makowiecki 1971: 34).

The psychologism of the individual going through a range of personal experiences – a characteristic trait of Young Polish literature – became the dominant category with respect to the reality depicted. Based on that subjective perception, one tends to impose the knowledge of the one and only absolute truth on others. This fact was highlighted by Michał Głowiński:

Essentially, there is nothing but the lyrical subject in that poetry. The domain of appearance no longer represents the extra-individual, external world. The psychological reality of the individual is thoroughly absolutised, and that process is evinced in lyrical forms in the unequal relationship between directly formulated admissions and the domain of appearance; such confessions come to predominate to a degree unknown in Polish poetry (Głowiński 1962:72).

In *Xięga...*, there is a palpable emphasis on showing the abundance of the inner life of the speaking subject, their extraordinary intelligence and continual striving for perfection through ceaseless transformation in the course of spiritual evolution. This is accompanied by a conviction of the uniqueness and originality of the speaking subject:

[...] I, absorbed with my own journey,
Pursue my own visions and adventures,
I have my own conjectures and proofs,
My own bright flashes of intuition,
My own multiple experiences... (Komornicka 2023: 519–520).

When attempting to identify the author with the lyrical subject situated within the space of the work, it is noticeable that they assume a confessional role in two dimensions. First, in the religion professed, emphasising in the *Uwagi do niniejszej Księgi* [*Notes on this Booke*]: "I consider all the assertions contained in this Booke to be valid WITHIN THE PURVIEW OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS; that is, to the exclusion of any conflict with it"³ and in confession, which is a kind of personal disclosure. Becoming a spiritual "creator" – a lyrical demiurge and judge – they are in keeping with the modernist paradigm of artist-creator, who sees life as a work of art or as a creative process, which Stanisław Przybyszewski described as follows:

The artist's external life is fashioned according to its needs by the metaphysical being in the artist, the one that creates, and for which the personal being is a tool only. The artist lives as they must, not as they want to. [...] All personal pleasures, [...] frenzies and pains are engendered in the artist by that creative, primordial being in order to draw from it a new impulse for creation. Or perhaps that external life is only a manifestation of all the creative sufferings and frenzies (Przybyszewski 1900: 8).

The author's creative imagination becomes the source of finding oneself as an entity that constantly makes itself in the creative process. Through the rejection of all that is sinful, earthly and carnal, the literary subject, like a trusting child, turns towards the Creator in the belief that "in Your image You have created me, dear God."

[...]
And trustingly, I think that to You, perhaps,
Oh, my GOD, my dearest GOD!
I do not bring such great shame,
Being, for some half a century,
A divine spark enclosed in a weary human,
An old child, bent over work,
For it is then that thought with a lively zest
Can circulate the narrow straits of mind (Komornicka 2023: 12).

³ Capital letters used in line with the manuscript.

There is no end to the process of creation because it is only the point of departure in the journey of the soul. Hence, one can find numerous foreshadowings in the work: “This is but the beginning of the acquaintance”, “the beginning of a feast”, “of a conversation”, “the first jug of champagne”, “the first volume of a novel”, “the first day”, “the first plan”, “the first in the world” or “the first time”. They are reminiscent of reincarnation, in which, after the death of the body, the soul can be embodied in a new physical entity. For the Young Polish symbolists – especially in the context of Hindu and Buddhist religions, whose elements are repeatedly encountered in *Xięga...* – that epitomised a kind of metaphysical desire to strive for the Absolute, constituting the sole goal of the human quest.

This recurring motive of continual renewal in Komornicka may also have been attributed to a lack of self-acceptance, which evinced itself in the poems through notions such as “the under-feathered”, “the Under-washed”, “the Under-drowned”, “the Under-chosen” (*Modlitwa za Żenię [Prayer for Żenia]*, *Na płaskim dachu [On a Flat Roof]*). The latter demonstrates a clear analogy with the 1902 autobiographical piece of prose entitled *Biesy [Demons]*, where the concept of the “under-born” first appeared. The self-vivisection which the speaking subject performs in the work does not bring relief; on the contrary, it leads to extremely negative assessments described as “Failed attempt! An aborted foetus”, which evoke revulsion and disgust. However, there is no place here for a definitive ending since, as Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska observed, suicide was not a solution for Komornicka, “[...] not only because of the strong instinct for life. First and foremost – due to the espoused theory of repeating one’s destiny in eternity” (Podraza-Kwiatkowska in: Komornicka 1996: 16). Meanwhile, Jerzy Sosnowski, notes that “The author of *The Booke of Idyllic Poetry* repeatedly underlines that the development of a person does not proceed harmoniously, according to an individual plan” (Sosnowski 1993: 84).

In Maria Komornicka’s late works, the journey leads towards inner and spiritual freedom, drawing its power from the art of creation. It is driven by a longing for Nirvana (inspired by Nietzsche’s philosophy) or the Hindu Devachan – the Temporary Paradise, which is the abode of the gods, an intermediate state of existence before the soul’s final rebirth in the physical body. In the poetry of other Young Polish artists, its wandering involves suffering, misery and abysses, which nonetheless lend it a profound meaning, as it makes one aspire towards spiritual development, towards good, enabling one to discover their individual creative powers (Wydrycka 2012). In this respect, Komornicka’s poetry is akin to the works of such poets as Charles Baudelaire, Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer or Bolesław Leśmian.

Komornicka wrote *Grabów podczas wojny. Xięga poezji idyllicznej* in 1917–1927 while staying at her family estate with her eldest brother Jan, having been brought there from a hospital for the mentally ill after the outbreak of World War I⁴ (Boniecki 1998: 80–81). Sister Aniela underlines that, at the time, the poet “exposed herself to all sorts of unpleasantness through her attire and manner”. The ten years it took to write *Xięga*... made it uneven both in terms of genre and value. Still, it is extraordinarily replete with meaning, difficult in reception, full of surprises, astonishing linguistic ideas, riddles and literary allusions. It draws on varied literary periods, cultural regions, religions, and communities, as well as paints a picture of an unknown future. It communicates through myths and symbols whose semantic interpretation challenges scholars and hermeneutists. The diversity of that work lies in its essence and significance, as it opens up to many concepts, revealing multiple interpretative possibilities and historical-literary analyses. The themes addressed are presented in transcendental and philosophical categories, leading to a metaphysical experience that involves transgression and sensitivity to all manifestations of existence. The work as a whole is steeped in reflection on existence, its place in the world and going beyond it, and in a sense of constant dilemma. The subject frequently delves into the theme of constant changeability and transformation, the tragedy of the trapped human individual and all entities.

Autobiographical interpretation of creative endeavour emerges quite organically in the poems in *Xięga*..., especially where the accomplished transfiguration is concerned. *Panie i ja [Ladies and I]* is particularly interesting in this context, as the male lyrical subject describes a personal experience of corporeality, the reasons for being different and the consequences of that experience. The recurring eponymous verse, “Ladies and I”, hints at a distinct perception of corporeality and the vague subjective self: female, male or androgynous. This is not merely authorial awareness of illness as a physical imperfection but, above all, the experience of otherness associated with psychological suffering and the absence of a sense of one’s own gender identity. Thus, the poem portrays the author’s inner struggle in the process of finding oneself and expressing their genuine nature. Just as many other Young Polish authors, Komornicka was not alone in that journey towards the literary ideal, but the quest for one’s own identity – taking place

⁴ “For her, war was first and foremost a moral fact, not a political one, and she experienced historical events precisely in their moral dimension, as the consequences of good or evil outweighing each other on the scales of spiritual order.” “[...] In that respect, she was very much like Słowacki, who weighed the vicissitudes of history on the scales of morality, examining their value in the evolution of the spirit, on the path of its striving for perfection”.

against the backdrop of the discourse of hatred, homophobia, exclusion or tolerance – was most palpably manifested in her life and work (Kita 2015: 123).

In addition, many important biographical details may be discerned in *Xięga...* Often enough, they may be identified thanks to the supplementary information from her sister Aniela's handwritten notes in the manuscript. The notes in question mention people, places, family, events or, for example, the poet's dental problems, which were fairly widely known. There is, in fact, a well-established legend that Maria pulled out all her teeth in order to give her face a new (male) shape. However, the remark in pencil which accompanies *Ząbki* [*Teeth*] dispels the oft-repeated rumour: "She suffered greatly over her ugly teeth – in time she had them all pulled out; she became utterly toothless very early on"⁵ (Komornicka 2023: 488).

In the poem *Nowy duch* [*The New Spirit*], the figures of the "little ones" are, in fact, real-life persons. Thus, "Franek" is Franciszek Komornicki (1881–1941), the author's younger brother, "Kryś" is the diminutive moniker of Jan Komornicki (1870–1952), her older brother, while "Ela" is Elżbieta Komornicka (1877–1954), Maria's year-older sister.

One can readily assume that *Wizyta doktorska (obrazek z sanatorium)* [*Physician's Visit (Picture from a Sanatorium)*] conveys reminiscences of the author's stay in institutions for the mentally ill, especially given phrases such as: "Lying as if taken down from a cross, weaker than a small moth, / Stupefied by longing, weak body, I lie without memory / And I'm weaker than a fly". The frequent descriptions of states of fatigue, torpor, infirmity (resulting from illness or, possibly, administration of sedatives) and terms referring to gender: "my life's quiet, blurry [...] masculine shape awaits", "at my manly childhood's dawn", "before the day of my male might" or "in this morning of my manly life". These examples likely reflect the process of Komornicka's discovery of otherness, which had much to do with the poet's sense of integrity as a person. Tomasz Basiuk maintains that "revealing oneself – to others and to oneself – as a person with a non-normative sexual identity presupposes that coming out is a speech act or some rhetorical gesture aimed at communicating a message addressed to others or to oneself. That message is the hidden truth about oneself" (Basiuk 2010: 116). That truth may lie at the core of loneliness, which is common to the stories of people who are alienated, who are other.

⁵ Komornicka's alleged removal of teeth has become the stuff of legend, therefore – by way of context – one should bear in mind the then dental treatment, the possibilities of dentistry as well as the availability of dental care in that period. See B. Piękoś (1997), *Rozwój stomatologii polskiej na przełomie XIX i XX wieku*, Kraków; J. Supady (2010), *Dentystyka w XIX i na początku XX wieku*, Łódź, W. Noszczyk (ed.) (2015), *Dzieje medycyny w Polsce*, vol. 1, Warsaw.

Besides the biographical context relating to gender change, it is worth noting that the pages of *Xięga...* often witness the tragedy of a person trapped in passivity and impotence, which transcends identity issues. There is grief in those pieces, an awareness of loss, the wailing of a soul which “grows so jaded in the constant oppression and misery” and whose anguish is all the greater because it is conscious. Those grievances and laments concern numerous shortcomings, both physical and spiritual. Those desires not only envision getting rid of a weak body but also satisfying low and mundane needs, such as ceaseless hunger, never having one’s fill or adequate living conditions. Such themes are reflected in verse in a number of poems including *Zachcianki* [*Whims*], *Mansarda xiążęca* [*Prince’s Mansard*], *Głód i słońce* [*Hunger and the Sun*], *Łkania letnie (z muzyką)* [*Summertime Weeping (with Music)*], *Głodne wojaki* [*Hungry Soldiers*] or *Dylemat* [*Dilemma*].

The literary subject in *Xięga...* is characterised by individualism and alienation, as it remains in the environmental opposition of “I” vs “them”. The motif of isolation (deliberate or compelled?) is quite frequent, while by setting the individual fate in contrast to the surrounding world, the poet expresses their inner states and experiences through metaphorical images (Stala 1988). Isolation is also presented as a borderline experience that leads to feelings of “nothingness” and “non-being”, which are conveyed using spatial terms such as “abyss” or “mist”.

The second person, shown through the relationship between “I” and “you”, also constitutes an interesting theme of lyrical reflection (Kozikowska-Kowalik 1982). That second person is often endowed with personal traits and functions as a lyrical character. It may be a mother (*Mama* [*Mum*], *Strzyż* [*Fleece*], *Wieczór* [*Evening*], “*Szeremere*” (fragment) [*“Cuckoo”* (fragment)]), a father as a sultan, emperor, old man, patriarch (*Żale parcelanta* [*Parceller’s Complaint*], *Dziwny sen* [*Strange Dream*], *Ahnung*, *Układy o raj. Dialog Demiurga z duszą zbawioną* [*Bargaining for Paradise. Dialogue of the Demiurge with a Redeemed Soul*], *Sen lejbwardzisty* [*The Dream of a Household Guard*], *Jasyr* [*Captivity*]), *Józia* (*Józia*), *Żenia* (*Modlitwa za Żenię* [*Prayer for Żenia*]), a caretaker (*Niania* [*Nanny*], *Żegnaj, wiosno!* [*Farewell, Spring!*]), lekarz (*Wizyta doktorska (Obrazek z sanatorium)* [*Physician’s Visit (Picture from a Sanatorium)*], *Sens niemoralny* [*The Immoral Meaning*]) or old beggar men (*Dziad śpi na górze* [*Old Man Sleeping Upstairs*], *Dziad na pieńku* [*Old Man on a Stump*], *Dziady grają* [*Old Men Playing*], *Dziadowskie żarty* [*Old Men’s Antics*])). The specific figures the author invokes – the parents or the nanny – have an impact on the psychological state of the literary protagonist, as they revive memories and evoke associations, drawing special attention as a result.

The literary “you” can also be a concept, a value or a characteristic, as the poems contain references to the Absolute, being, self or suffering (*Biedna Polska* [*Poor Poland*], *Nie spiesz się* [*Hurry Not*], *Twarz* [*Face*], *Tajemnica jesieni* [*The Mystery of Autumn*], *Noblesse oblige*, *Wielkanoc* [*Easter*]). Furthermore, the second person may denote God, the Demiurge, Buddha – the Supreme Being – who gives one new form and liberates them from the present state, making the poetic reflections more profound and transcendent.

The lyrical subject engages in an internal dialogue, directing its words to anyone within the artistic space of the work. With the masks put on at will, feelings of guilt or remorse are mitigated. On the other hand, *Układy o raj. Dialog Demiurga z duszą zbawioną* [*Bargaining for Paradise. Dialogue of the Demiurge with a Redeemed Soul*], which represents a kind of rehabilitation and confession (Stelingowska 2019), offers an example of mental catharsis and purification, through which the emotional past is put in order.

Summary

The lyrical subject in the poems of *Xięga...* remains indeterminate, ambiguous and difficult to define. It strays, thrashes about, seeks shape and transforms, constantly anticipating change. It is weary, exhausted, fatigued, and constantly experiences unfulfillment. It craves for the soul to be liberated from the body, yearns to be free and able to soar towards higher goals and escape from the repetitive and monotonous everyday life. It demands sensations and spaces that transcend the earthly confines. Its creation engenders a variety of interpretations of autobiographical, identity-related and poetic nature, which determine the value of *Xięga...*, opening it up to a variety of perspectives and approaches in a comprehensive analysis.

It is nonetheless certain that Maria Komornicka’s last work is an exceedingly poignant attempt at finding and accepting the human being in unity with the surrounding world. This attempt is made as part of a dual existence of being and non-being, soul and body, the human and nature. Drawing on Edward Boniecki, it may be assumed that *Xięga* poezji idyllicznej:

[...] has outlived the larchwood manor house and the old park, in the shadow of which Piotr engaged in his spiritual exercises. It remained a crucial testimony to Komornicka’s existence between the wars and, at the same time, the most important record of her spiritual life in general (Boniecki 1998).

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