

SUMMARY

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Title of the thesis: *Between delight and torment. Existential dimension of Małgorzata Hillar's poetry.*

This thesis is of monograph nature. The adjective 'existential', present in the title of the thesis, plays a significant part, delineating direction of the research. In the basic meaning 'existence' denotes 'being, life, living conditions'¹. Therefore, one of the aims of this dissertation was to retrace the fate of Małgorzata Hillar, hitherto virtually unknown since the poet deliberately – for political and personal reasons – left numerous facts from her past unsaid or distorted them by creating a fictitious biography. This refined, yet untrue biography has been present in various biographical entries and press publications until now. Unfortunately, even the authors of books devoted to the poet dealt with recreating her life story very superficially. The publications in question are: *Małgorzata Hillar* by Agnieszka Nietresta and *Miłość jest światłem moich wierszy. O poezji Małgorzaty Hillar* [*Love is the light of my poems. On Małgorzata Hillar's poetry*] by Tadeusz Linkner. Significant consequences ensue from this gap, since the literary output of the author of *Gliniany dzbanek* [*Clay jug*] undoubtedly stems from her personal experience.

Ignorance of the circumstances in which the literary works originated as well as the lack of knowledge of the important contexts led previous researchers to incorrect interpretations of not only single poems, but their whole cycles. The logical consequence of the research I have done was putting the inaccuracies right and discussing a large group of lyrics in a different way.

A major assumption of this thesis was also to demonstrate a variety of motifs present in Małgorzata Hillar's poetry. Her brilliant debut during Polish October affected the later perception of her entire literary work. Readers were delighted by the fresh and at the same time bold and vivid love poems, shocking especially when contrasted with hitherto 'production' of socialist realism. The label of feminine love lyric poetry was eventually strengthened by press articles in which she was compared to Sappho, Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska and Halina Poświatowska. It went unnoticed that already in her first volume other topics emerge – the author of *Gliniany dzbanek* [*Clay jug*] returns to war trauma, she

¹ Entry 'existence' [in:] *Słownik języka polskiego*, edited by M. Szymczak, vol.1, Warszawa 1990, p. 520

writes about the threat of intolerance, antisemitism, alienation of individuals and groups which do not fall into 'normal' category. Her poetry stretches between delight and torment, which is just one step away from the second meaning of 'existential'.

In the following volumes more and more frequently we can encounter characters who for various reasons have become social outcasts. Małgorzata Hillar takes an interest in the Romani community and the culture of North American Indian as she feels alienated herself. Ever since she was a child, she perceived herself as a misfit mocked by her nearest family and friends. In her poems she sympathizes with those unhappily in love, mentally ill, suffering from depression or alcoholism. What they all have in common is misery beyond the power of individuals and perception of life as Sisyphus torture.

Therefore, another objective of this dissertation was pointing out the relation between the work of Małgorzata Hillar and existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, François Mauriac and others. One should keep in mind that the author studied philosophy and one of her lecturers was the famous Prof. Władysław Tatarkiewicz. She was an exceptionally well-read person who travelled widely, given the realities of the time, and socialized with Polish and foreign intellectuals. All this greatly influenced and shaped her outlook on life, which to a large extent corresponded with the principles of existentialism.

In accordance with these premises, a starting point for further analysis in each of the chapters is reconstructed facts from the author's biography. Chapter 1 presents the childhood of Janina Hillar born to a wealthy landowning family, spent in a palace in Piesienica. In this chapter I discuss complex relationships she had with her parents. I analyze her preserved juvenilia as well as mature poems devoted to her mother and father. I point out the origins and meaning of 'Gypsy lyrics'.

In chapter 2 I refer to, hitherto unknown, wartime fortunes of the Hillar family. The deliberate shifting of her date of birth by Małgorzata Hillar was not intended to merely make her appear younger, but it was purposeful. It let the author conceal her background of landowners, evade enquiries about wartime memories (her father's collaboration with the Germans could have caused serious trouble in reborn Polish state). The conviction that during World War II Janina Hillar was a little girl made it seem irrelevant for the literary critics to analyze the influence of that experience on the author's work. Meanwhile, as I demonstrate, the traumatic experience from her past shaped her as a determined pacifist and feminist who wrote such poems as *Buciki* [*Little shoes*], *Kropla deszczu* [*Raindrop*] or *Aniołowie Hiroszimy* [*Angels of Hiroshima*].

Chapter 3 is devoted to recreating the student years of Janina Hillar and her metamorphosis into Małgorzata. I clarify the doubts surrounding the author's education. I tell about her youthful fascinations and adolescent loves which became inspiration for her later poems. The hero of poetical triptych – 'Dzik', who died tragically, has become the focal point. I also discuss her first mature lyrics which were undoubtedly created during her studies. Chapters 4 and 5 concern her first volume of verse – *Gliniany dzbanek* [Clay jug] which was phenomenal in comparison with hitherto literature of socialist realism, becoming part of the current of Post-October Polish thaw. I make reference to the relations the author had with so called generation of Present Day. I also investigate reactions of the critics to this spectacular debut, legitimacy of comparisons to Różewicz poetics, works of Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska and Halina Poświatowska. I recount the story of her relationship with Włodzimierz Zychowicz – the poet's first life partner, the initiator of her debut and the addressee of numerous poems from her first volume.

In chapter 6 I interpret four cycles of poems published in *Prośba do macierzanki* [Request to a thyme]. They contain deliberations on birth and withering away of love, philosophical reflections on solitude of man in the world, inability to go beyond the boundaries of one's own existence. One may find the source of this anxiety in the author's biography. Complicated personal predicament of Małgorzata Hillar – having to make a choice whether to stay with her present partner or pursue her new affection for Zbigniew Bieńkowski coincides with the first symptoms of depression she is to struggle with till the end.

Chapter 7 deals with motherhood. At that time significant changes took place in the poet's life: her splitting up with Włodzimierz Zychowicz, relationship with Zbigniew Bieńkowski, the birth of her son Dawid. Being a mother causes ambivalent feelings in her. Małgorzata Hillar in a very naturalistic way depicts the agony of labour, emulating the style of Maria Kuncewiczowa and preceding the cycle *Jestem baba* [I'm female] by Anna Świrszczyńska. At the same time in the volume of *Czekanie na Dawida* [Expecting Dawid] she includes poems brimful of love for the child who is yet to be born.

Chapter 8 has been devoted to journeys the author of *Prośba do macierzanki* [Request to a thyme] makes for both professional and private purposes. Seldom do they result in literary pieces. It happens only on the rare occasions when strong emotions are involved, therefore during the poet's stay at an international festival of poetry in contemporary Yugoslavia *Split* and *Opatija*, which deal with emotional dilemmas of the heroine, come into being.

The adventure of a lifetime for Małgorzata Hillar certainly was her two-year stay in the United States. In this dissertation I reconstruct that period, hitherto only briefly mentioned in publications. Direct contact with outstanding European paintings that she saw in American museums gave rise to her fascination of Vermeer and the creation of a few original essays devoted to his work. Out of her longing for Poland, native culture and history she creates poems: *Portret* [Portrait] and ****Idzie święty Krzysztof Olbrzym...* [Here comes Saint Christopher the Giant] connected with Kazimierz Dolny, as well as *Warszawie – dedykuję* [To Warsaw – I dedicate]. World travels and being a direct witness of events that had significant impact on the mentality of the 20th century man do not make the author depict them but instead provoke to reflection on the meaning of life of an individual.

Małgorzata Hillar was not a mere eulogist of love. From her very first volume we can find in her poems despondent characters, overwhelmed by burden of existence, incapable of dealing with everyday living. She comes into contact with such people while being treated for depression in psychiatric hospitals. This unknown part of her biography I reconstruct in chapter 9. There I discuss literary works inspired by her observations of patients. I also analyze the origins of the cycle '*wiersze wigilijne*' [Christmas lyrics], their relevance to traumatic reaction to her being left by Zbigniew Bieńkowski. I review and verify the myth grown up around this issue.

Chapters 10 and 11 concentrate on Małgorzata Hillar's struggling with and successful recovery from alcoholism. She wanted to rejoin the literary elite by publishing the eclectic volume of poems: *Gotowość do Zmartwychwstania* [Ready for the Resurrection]. Shocking poems, depicting growing helplessness of the heroine defeated by depression and alcoholism, lost, forsaken, not accepting the passing of time appear together with lyrics filled with trust and optimism, which were inspired by the philosophy of Alcoholics Anonymous and the teaching of a Jesuit priest Anthony de Mello. They also provide evidence of the author's conversion from confirmed atheism to acceptance of God's existence, the attitude verging on pantheism. Hitherto lyrical subject, alienated and overwhelmed by the feeling of loneliness in the world is replaced by an individual who is part of human community that finds the meaning of life in generally understood presence of Supreme Being.

The dissertation ends with chapter 12 in which I discuss mysterious circumstances of the poet's death and the reaction of literary critics who tried to sum up her work.

This thesis fills many gaps in the biography of Małgorzata Hillar, verifies myths and legends grown up around her person, corrects inaccuracies and deliberate distortions. It takes into account all available works, including the ones which were not published in book

versions but found in manuscripts or magazines by the author of the thesis. By referring to numerous critical articles and two published books - *Miłość jest światłem moich wierszy. O poezji Małgorzaty Hillar* [Love is the light of my poems. On Małgorzata Hillar's poetry] by Tadeusz Linkner and *Małgorzata Hillar* by Agnieszka Nietresta, it fills in the gaps and corrects the wrong interpretations. It reveals the influence of AA group's beliefs and philosophy of Anthony de Mello on the later work of the author of *Gotowość do Zmartwychwstania* [Ready for the Resurrection].

I hope that my PhD thesis will become monograph for further studies on the life and work of Małgorzata Hillar. It is quite possible that there are still documents, letters, photos and manuscripts to be found. Surely it would be worth investigating further her student years, the time spent in the USA, her relationships with the two life partners – Włodzimierz Zychowicz and Zbigniew Bieńkowski. Perhaps publishing this work will revive interest in this lyric, so fresh despite passing of years, still remembered by many readers, yet nearly forgotten by literary critics.

29. 05. 2020 r., Rzeszów

Place and date

Dr. Banaś

Signature