

# Cripple and defective — post-romantic traumas. *The Book of idyllic poetry*

Katarzyna Turkowska

Incidents which took place at the end of July 1914 were the beginning of the new trauma of the another polish generation. After the November and January Uprisings which formed the national imaginary of Poles, the time of the I World War has come. The war was another occurrence which has stoked polish nationalism and messianism.

If we wish to analyse the term of messianism in its relation to the modernist discourse we should refer to probably one of the most underestimated works of that period, *Księga Poezji Idyllicznej* (*The Book of the Idyllic Poetry*) by Piotr Odmieniec Włast, and examine that text respecting post-romantic threads on which it is based<sup>1</sup>.

## *The experience of the war and the nation*

According to Karolina Krasuska Włast renovates romantic discourse basing on religion<sup>2</sup>. This is the reason for which he has been experienced with being a weirdo in the sphere of being effected by historical trauma. His generation had an opportunity to face the tragedy similar to the experience of their parents and grandparents, they also have a chance to rebel in the name of some deep and important idea. Włast did not take part in a mentioned rebellion, what is more, we can assume that the war did not influence him at all. There is no use trying to find in works of the writer evidences of engagement in war issues. That could be surprising especially when we take into consideration Włast's cult of history and the tradition of taking part in insurrections in his family<sup>3</sup>. The only reference of writer's attitude to the war can be found

1 The matter of messianism in *Księga poezji idyllicznej* (*The Book of the Idyllic Poetry*) in the context of gender and nation was brought up by Karolina Krasuska in chapter *Trans/zawłaszczenia*, [in:] eadem, *Pleć i naród: Trans/lokacje*, Warsaw 2011.

2 Ibidem, p. 66.

3 Boniecki E., *Modernistyczny dramat ciała. Maria Komornicka*, Warsaw 1998, pp. 57–59.

in *Odpowiedzi Poety*<sup>4</sup> (*The Answers of the Poet*) in which from the very beginning he carries bitter narration about Poland which imposes taking action on him. He forfeits from the patriotic action especially from that one which means attacking the Germans and paying tribute to the Motherland by sanctifying it. Włast suggests throwing religious hallmarks away from patriotic discourse:

Nie — by mój Entuzjazm boski zgasł,  
Ale boskie BOGU się należy;  
[KPI 125]<sup>5</sup>

The answer refers to the charge of not taking part in the national uprising. Although Włast approaches to those insinuations with a distance, he quickly changes his attitude and he tries to find an answer for those charges, an answer which is also an offensive. Being The Exterior<sup>6</sup> of the real world could make the writer express anger in his works. Perhaps an obligation towards his peers makes him mention tortures which they were subject to during the war, he compares the experience of the war to a hailstorm. He also mentions his own suffering which can be compared to descending to hell:

Dant niech suchy powie, gdzie bywałem,  
Faustemdrugim niech tłumaczy Goethe,  
Nacziketas<sup>7</sup> transcendentnym szalem,  
Odys, gdy przepłynął Styks i Lete...  
Tam ja byłem, skąd ta cała wojna  
Wiotkim jeno zdaje się wołaniem  
Matki, co o dziecko niespokojna,  
Po ogródku ogląda się za niem.  
[KPI 126]

4 Komornicka M., *Księga poezji idyllicznej*, AMML, sign. 346, p. 125.

5 Passages quoted from *Księga poezji idyllicznej* (*The Book of Idyllic Poetry*) are signified with KPI and the number of the card of a manuscript under signature 346 in The Adam Mickiewicz Museum of Literature in Warsaw.

6 In *Księga poezji idyllicznej* Włast builds bipolar dependence The Exterior–The Interior and he situated himself (as a cripple prophet) in opposition to the nation/populace/Real world. The Exterior as transcendental element is inseparably connected with The Interior but it also Has to be its opposition. The objective world is a base for an entity. Therefore everything which cannot be empirically classified becomes delimited. This is why the poet feels alienated and that is the reason for which he thinks that he speaks his mind from the outsider of the boundary. More about this subject in Foucault M., *Powiedziane, napisane. Szaleństwo i literatura*, Warsaw 1999.

7 *Nacziketas, Nachiketa* — (sanskrit: *Naciketa*) was a son of Vājashravas, the child protagonist in an ancient Hindu fable about the nature of the soul and Brahman. The story is told in the *Katha Upanishad* (c. 5th century BCE) and it is a parable about the invitation to awakening, and contemplation. When the young *Nachiketa* was near to the god of Death, *Yama*, he was taught Self-knowledge and the separation of the human soul (the supreme Self) from the body. They also talked about the rejection of material desires which are ephemeral. The name *Nachiketa*, ('that which is unperceived') refers to the Spirit that lies within all entities like e.g. fire, the spirit that gives the unquenchable thirst for the unknown. See: Swami Nikhilaranda, *The Upanishads*, New York 1949, pp. 106–115, [online], [access: 08.07.2014], <<http://www.estudentavedanta.net/Swami%20Nikhilaranda%20-%20Upanishads%20I%20-%20%20Katha,%20Isa,%20Kena,%20Mundaka%20%5BEnglish%5D.pdf>>.

In *Odpowiedzi Poety* Krasuska wishes to see ‘Włast justifying his masculine personal ego in relation to personified Poland’<sup>8</sup>. Even if Krasuska uses gender conceptual model it is an overinterpretation to read this work in relation to the discourse of sex because Poland is there (in the poem) not a simple personification of a woman but an entity, realisation of Hegel’s *Volkegeist* (literally: ‘spirit of the nation’)<sup>9</sup>. Therefore the nation as it is cannot be treated as the entity, if only finds its final form in the state which existence is the reality for the nation.

That kind of interpretation is supported by *Notatki krytyczno-refleksyjne na różne tematy* (*Critical and Reflective Notes on Various Subjects*) which came into existence in interwar period (a piece of them refers to 1930, so to the time three years after the writer finished his *Księga poezji idyllicznej*). Włast is far away from the religious, gender and martyr’s discourse. If we would like to name the discourse of his literary statements, it would be the nationalistic discourse:

NIE WIECIE CZYM BYŁA POLSKA! Wiedziecie przynajmniej czym być może: a może być tym, czym chcecie, to jest cudem nad cudami, arcydziełem państwa, kraju i narodu<sup>10</sup>.

Włast writes directly about the equality of the essence and existence: the state is formed by the nation. It is impossible to make Poles get emotionally attached to their county by telling them that their country is wonderful. The only way to achieve that goal is to tell them the truth about Poland. The society (as a political construct) can become a foundation of the nation understood as the representation of the particular culture. Therefore the world-view of the nation is an impact which influences the condition of Poland. Consequently, the state is a material, an epitome of nation’s features in the real world. The nation should be powerful with its spirit, thought and emotion. But this is not a space for messianism and the Christ.

‘Undercreated’ — *cripples, prophets, lunatics*

In *Księga poezji idyllicznej* Włast makes use of the Christ in two contexts. Firstly, when he talks about cripples, people who are stigmatised, the chosen ones [*Modlitwa za Żenię, Medytacja znachora* (*The Pray for Żenia, The Witch Doctor’s Meditation*)]. Secondly, when he talks about himself as the Son or the Heir (sometimes he calls himself explicitly as the brother of the Christ).

8 Krasuska K., op. cit., p. 66.

9 Hegel G.W., *Wykłady z filozofii dziejów*, vol. 1, 2, Cracow 1958.

10 Komornicka M., *Notatki krytyczno-refleksyjne na różne tematy*, The Adam Mickiewicz Museum of Literature in Warsaw, sign. 369, card no. 11.

The poet fathers an idiosyncratic contact with the God upon cripples. Even poor, ‘undercreated’ Żenia with from Down’s Syndrome (‘mongolska glowina’) is endowed with childish trustfulness, joy and free mind although she is a grown woman:

Pokorna, głodna Żenia, co wśród śmieci  
Znajduje pokarm dla siebie niegodny,  
A śmiech radosny ma, jak małe dzieci,  
I umysł, mimo ciasnoty, swobodny.  
[KPI 358]

Żenia’s handicap places her in an opposition to the rest of the society. The lyrical narrator notes a dichotomy in the existence of a weirdo. On the one hand the woman is identified and judged by her handicap. On the other hand she is endowed with extraordinary sensitivity which does not make the real ordinary life easier but it simplifies achieving an aware spirituality. Włast goes even further and calls Żenia’s handicap ‘the crown of every virtue’.

The heroine is alienated and ‘subject to all’ because of her handicap but the lyrical narrator predicts the better future for her. It notes women’s bright strength, supernal grace, the mystery. The lyrical narrator becomes a prophet as it notices spark of God in such a miserable creature. At last Żenia is the only who recognises some superior order during the war:

Poddana wszystkim... a jednak widziałem  
Cię dziwnie ufną w dniu wojennej wrzawy.  
Twe przedłożone drżały całym ciałem,  
Lecz ty wznosiłaś oczy bez obawy.  
  
Była w nich cisza codziennych męczarni,  
Mądrość ofiary, odwaga nędzarza,  
Któremu w bitwie nie gorzej i swarnej,  
Niż gdy w pokoju nęka go moc wraży.  
[KPI 359]

In the time of danger sanctified ‘Martyr of God’<sup>11</sup> (Żenia) stays alone but proud, without a shade of fear. She looks into the future with calm like she knows a mystery of inexpressible. Michele Foucault notes that on the boundary of inexpressible appears something what cannot be shoulder by any language<sup>12</sup>. According to Foucault every disability hides some universal truths which has been eliminated by the culture. He suggests that only on the bound of elimination ‘from our knowledge’<sup>13</sup> that, what is inexpressible, can evince itself. This is what happens in the case of Żenia.

11 Włast also refers to the figure of Saint Mary, Żenia has some attributes of her.

12 Foucault M., op. cit., pp. 151–160.

13 Ibidem, p. 176.

Włast mulls over the sense of diseases, he puts a preternatural provenance to them. This opinion finds a confirmation in the voice of an angel from *Medytacje Znachora* telling that diseases ‘have their lofty aim’. The lyrical narrator digresses about the sense of treatment since a disability (here blindness) causes an intensification of other, more important abilities:

(Przyszło mi na myśl) że każda choroba  
Ma swój cel doskonały... Niebios darem  
Jest tajemniczym... Więc, może, z przedwczesnym  
Zniknięciem tej choroby dobroczynnej,  
Rwie się rozwój tej doskonałości.  
[KPI 355]

The cure is never complete — we can compare it to an amputation after with the patient who has his or her extremity amputated, he/she stays with it in some kind of mental connection. Włast using the language of poetry provides knowledge about mental diseases which will be presented many years later by Foucault who claims that even after healing the illness there will remain ‘one’s relation to phantasms, to that, what is impossible in the human [...] even after healing gloomy relationship of a man and madness remains the eternal memory [...]’<sup>14</sup>.

Ethical issues do not interfere the main message concerning the genesis of diseases (including mental diseases with which Komornicka has come into contact). It is obvious that the existence of the specific disability is the result of the God’s will. Simultaneously Włast identifies handicaps with fates of the Christ:

Wtem przypomniałem sobie, com wyczytał,  
Że NIEMI DUŻO WIDZĄ. I to także,  
Iż Chrystusowi poczytano zbrodnią,  
Że wskrzeszał i uzdrawiał...  
[KPI 355]

People with disabilities are perfect in the other terms. They perform a function of the chosen ones, they have the gift of intuition. They are living as stigmatised individuals for the exact reason — they feel more and because of that we can certainly treat them as post-romantic psychics based on Mickiewicz’s *Karusia*. That last mentioned fact is clear especially when we enter the spirit of the first poem in *Księga*<sup>15</sup> in which Włast confesses that *Romantyczność* by Mickiewicz has been one of his inspirations during creating his work.

14 Ibidem, p. 152.

15 I mean *The Preface* situated on unnumbered card which follows the title card.

In the poem which follows *The Preface* [*Jakie to dziwnie (How weird it is)* KPI 1] the author creates himself as a calm, docile child who sits in the room and does what it likes the most — it is scrawling.

That kind of literary representation evokes an image of a child in the role of the nescient wise man. The romantic commonplace of a pure, unblemished creature owning the natural ability of communicating with the world of spirit is reborn in works of Piotr Włast. Therefore it is self-evident to ask about the reason of that state of affairs. Why Włast, like the Christ, favored tender and disabled creatures and made them the chosen ones? Is that because he had a feeling of being defective and dissociable?

Włast is defective because he remains a man without roots. As he is used to defining it — he is underborn. In 1907 at the age of 31 Maria Komornicka decides to reject the gender code. The new arisen individual is liberated and self-conscious. But he does not have experiences from childhood and adolescence which are extremely vital in the process of achieving self-consciousness. *Księga poezji idyllicznej* is a space where Włast trying to fill that emptiness builds the universe of imaginary life.

The act of creation which in many cases turn out to be movement away from oneself is something exactly opposite in case of Włast. We are facing the recreation, not destruction. What is more, this is a kind of post-romantic recreation — the poet presents his childhood in the poetics of a myth — idyllic visions rebuild or rather re-constitute the subjectivity of the prophet who takes the form of a child-son. In *Księga poezji idyllicznej* Włast creates a character of The Son of God and he gladly identifies himself with the Christ. He definitely rejects the idea of the conflict between a human and the God. Everyone has oneself way of communicating with Almighty:

Na każdego Łask Promieniu może być tylko on: Bóg u góry, on na końcu,  
i nikt więcej w całym Wszechbycie.

Tym Promieniem Łaski, tym Sznurem Rodzinnym, tą Tętnicą Natchnień  
Bezpośrednich, tą specjalną Falą, tą indywidualną z BOGIEM, wyłączną  
Tajemnicą [...]

[KPI 217]

Włast as the modernist prophet has wide knowledge about the quiddity, the truth about humanity. As the self-conscious creature the poet is obligated to transfer that knowledge to the objective reality which is not prepared to receive it. Odmieniec presents himself as the notable individual, his task it to take Volkgeist into the higher state of mind. Włast, however, does not

support Hegel's belief about individuals<sup>16</sup>. The poet is aware of historicity of his acts, he has an intuition of a purpose and history mechanism<sup>17</sup>. He yields a prophetic tone to his works like in the case of Hymny nadziei quoted above which links the character of a mantra, *Evangels* and *Genesis z ducha* (*Genesis from the Spirit*) by Juliusz Słowacki. Repeated words 'Let's rejoice, let's rejoice' conjure reality. Realities of Włast's life do not meet his expectations.

While returning to childhood, Włast experiences the Mystery of Existence. He can 'ineffably wonder' at the world and spin his idyllic yarn. The time stops. The pure intuition which is a privilege of cripples and lunatics is also a privilege of children. A new consciousness which the writer achieves thanks to returning to childhood let him 'resign from his social status, the status of a sane man and, finally, from his gender'<sup>18</sup>. This is why we can have the impression that idyllic images drawn e.g. in the series *Na wiosnę* (*In the spring*) have the second meaning. They are the prelude, intermezzo of the tragedy which takes place beyond the reader but which shines through *Księga poezji idyllicznej*, inter alia in the poem *Arcykłopot poufny* (*The Secret Archtrouble*):

Ach!... ty nieszczęsna szato,  
 W której się ledwo mieszczę!  
 Długo-m z twej winy jeszcze  
 Za kwarantanny krata  
 Trwać będę nieporadny,  
 Aż wzruszone dołą  
 Aniolki mnie wyzwolą  
 Przynosząc strój paradny.  
 [KPI 477]

and in *Układy o raj* (*Agreements about Paradise*):

Zamiast tryumfu... daj mi szczęście!  
 Zamiast zwycięskich porachunków,  
 Zamiast odwetu mętnych trunków,  
 (Niech je spijają, gdy chcą, Bogi!)  
 Daj MOJE szczęście, daj mi szczęście!  
 Tak wilem przeszedł różnej drogi,  
 A nie wiem jeszcze, co to szczęście!  
 [KPI 19]

16 Artfulness of mind consist in using an idiosyncratic view of an individual to fulfill the historical process which itself is independent from motivations of the subject. A human is motivated by ambition not by belief of historicity of his/her mission. Notable individuals often ends not well. If they complete their task in developing Volkgeist, they are not longer necessary (e.g. Julius Caesar or Alexander the Great). See: Hegel G.W., op. cit., vol. 1, Cracow 1958, pp. 100–119.

17 Ibidem, pp. 4–119.

18 Sosnowski J., *Śmierć czarownicy!*, Warsaw 1993, p. 84.

Dziś, gdy cierpienia złagodniały,  
Z powracającym krwi obiegiem,  
Czuję dopiero dzikie mrowie,  
Widzę dopiero, jaka męka  
Gięła mię długich lat szeregim,  
Ze słowo ludzkie nie opowie.

[KPI 32]

Wlast experiences great physical suffering. He calls his body a costume which is yet too small to contain his spirit. In *Układy o raj* we have to do with a dialogue between a father and a son. Demiurge is looking for his son from the sky and he admits to every bad thing he has done to his child. Alone and poor life of an old child is affected by real pain. The only way to accept pain was to find its explanation in the superior order. Asceticism becomes Wlast's way to cope with the miserable body which found its expression in following strophes:

Ty niedochrzczony, smrodny Żydzie,  
Ty niemowlęcy starowino,  
Bezzębny, łysy, pomarszczony,  
Skurczony, zgięty, wykrzywiony  
Chronicznym gniewem na wsze strony,  
Bo wszystko złego mu przyczyną!  
Wdzięczny za starość!... więdną uszy!  
Kto go nie widział, tego wzruszy!

[...]

Ty zaś, jak Feniks na swym stosie,  
Śmiało się smażyysz w własnym sosie,  
I w górnym śpiewasz wciąż patosie;  
A zamiast kląć — w Metafizykę  
Przetwarzasz kocią plag muzykę.  
Impertynencko wprost wyraźnie  
Eksploatujesz swoją kaźnię,  
Ty transcendentalny błaznie!

[KPI 25]

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Post-romantic trauma in *Księga poezji idyllicznej* refers to a successful attempt of redefining the concept of a prophet and also identifying that last one with the figure of a child/cripple/lunatics. It also refers to movement away from martyr's discourse and (less successful) attempt of separating Polishness from religion. Messianism itself however is deeply rooted in Polish tradition. The martyr of Polish nation has been developed by two next generations fighting in II World War and then against communism. Contemporary generation born 100 years after Maria Komornicka is, like her, historically orphaned but at its own request. And even today's twenty and thirty year-olds use other

culture codes than Wlast, they need another analysis of the experience of trauma (or rather inability to cope with lack of trauma), this time in the post-modern key.

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