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Karolina Kusek and Her Poetry

Dedicated to Professor Ryszard Waksmund

Karolina Kusek is a Polish modern poet who writes the original poems for adults, and also for children. She belongs to the group of distinguished and the most important poets – intellectualists of the last twenty five years in Poland. Among the youngest readers and lovers of poetry in our Country, Kusek is one of the most favourite modern poets. Polish literary critics and historians of literature (Zbigniew Baran, Marianna Bocian, Grzegorz Leszczyński, Jolanta Ługowska, Danuta Mucha, Zofia Ożóg, Ryszard Waksmund and others) confirm the artistic strength of her lyrical poetry.

Kusek was born in 1940 in Tarnopol. She began writing the epigrams for adults (in the early 1960s) but “*poetical time*” of Karolina Kusek started when she published *Słonecznikowe nutki* (*The Little Sunflower Notes*), her first collection of children’s lyrics, in 1982. Next she published beautiful and impressive poems in the following six volumes: *Na Ziemi i wyżej* (*On the Earth and Higher*, 1985), *Spacerkiem przez pole* (*Sauntering across the Field*, 1988), *Barwy lata* (*The Summer Colours*, 1989), *Twoje słowa* (*Your Words*, 1991), *Z babcią za rękę* (*Holding Grandma’s Hand*, 1996), and *Pod parasolem nieba* (*Under the Sky Umbrella*, 2002). The poetess produced beautiful poems with philosophical and existential topics. On one hand, her poetry is oriented towards poetical self-knowledge as well as emotional and psychological self-analysis, and on the other hand, it is an artistic contemplation of human existence as well as the essence and beauty of the World. The lyrical word-paintings that are the literal image of artistic world in Kusek’s poetry takes on metaphorical and symbolical quality. The subtle poetical world in her poetry is full of colours, scents, sounds, and *lyrical* feelings. Calmness, pastel-subtlety and creative subjectivity dominate in *>the nature<* of that marvellous poetry written by *the Poetess from Wrocław*. The last three years have been a time of *>artistic synthesis of lyrical ideas<* that were presented (from 1982 to 2002) in Kusek’s writing, and also a time of poetess’s fundamental poetical statements. Kusek compiled ***Moje kra-***

jobrazy (*My Landscapes*, 2005), the volume of >selected poems< . In that volume, the poetess wanted to depict various aspects of human existence. That volume of poems showed Karolina Kusek's honest poetical >*manifesto*< as well as her admiration for existence [as an important value in her poetical collections].

Sometimes, Karolina Kusek created the >**self-portraits**< (**portraits of lyrical persona**) and presented the lyrical Speaker as **a poetess** [e.g. in poems: *Myśli do wiersza* (*The Ideas for the Poem*), *Dzika róża* (*The Briar-Rose*) and *Gdy wiersze piszę* (*When I Am Writing the Poems*)]:

*Nawołuję myśli do wiersza,
rozmaicie, jak tylko umiem...
(I call variously the reflections to a poem as well so I am
able to do it...)*

(Myśli do wiersza / The Ideas for the Poem)

*[Dziką różę] chciałabym do flakonu moich wierszy
włożyć.
(I would like to put the briar-rose in a flower-vase of my
poems.)*

(Dzika róża / The Briar-Rose)

Elsewhere, she described the Speaker as **a man with strong poetical personality** [e.g. in poems: *Twoje słowa* (*Your Words*) and *Wianuszek* (*Little Wreath*)]. Lyrical speaker's objective views on the World express the feelings and opinions of poetess [e.g.: *Ptasie śpiewy* (*The Bird Songs*)]. Often, the Speaker gets to know his (her) own nature and character, abilities etc.:

*Gdy stoję – górą jestem,
gdy siedzę – pagórkami.
A gdy się położę twarzą do nieba,
aby odpocząć
– równiną
z niebieskimi jeziorami oczu...
(When I stand – I am a mountain, when I sit – (I am) a hill.
When I lie and I face the skies, in order to rest – (I am) a
valley with the blue eyes-lakes...)*

(Krajobrazy / The Landscapes)

In a poem *Krajobrazy* (*The Landscapes*), Kusek used metaphors to paint a real picture of human body that is, in fact, >*the collection of bodies*<. Poetess demonstrated metaphoric thinking by pointing out relations between a man and the nature (a mountain, a hill, a valley). Among the poetical phrases of that poem, the readers of Kusek's lyrical poetry may find the word pictures with the philosophical ideas. In this context, the poem is close to philosophical poetry of Leopold Staff, Józef Ratajczak and Joanna Kulmowa.

The aspect of self-knowledge, and also psychological self-analysis is described by the lyrical Speaker of *Dojrzewanie w słońcu* (*Maturing in the Sun*):

*Leżę na łące
i spoglądam w błękit.
[.....]
i nasycam się błękitem,
i dojrzewam w słońcu.
(I am lying on the meadow and I am looking at the blue.
(...) and I am absorbing the blue, and I am ripening in the
sun.)*

The **portraits of diverse >objects<** are an interesting poetical phenomenon of Karolina Kusek's lyrics. Among lyrical portraits there are: a portrait of personified Night and a portrait of personified Morning in poem *Noc – Poranek* (*Night – Morning*). The artistic portrait of personified Night in poem *Noc* (*Night*) is also marvellous:

*... [Noc] jak wielki
uczony
w todze,
chodzi z ekierką
po Mlecznej Drodze...
([Night] like the Great Man of Knowledge, in his university
gown and with a triangle, walks on the Milky Way...)*

The lyrical Speaker of **Kusek's poetry** often **glorifies the Universe and the nature** by subtle usage of *religious symbols* and >*religious vocabulary*< [with a collection of words and phrases] which are used in liturgy. Although the >*religious vocabulary*< in Kusek's poetry is rather inconspicu-

ous, nevertheless all >religious< terms create the world of *Franciscan ideas* that exists in Polish poetry of the 20th century. Those ideas are similar to the ideas of Leopold Staff's poetry or to the ideas of Kazimiera Hłakowiczówna's and Joanna Kulmowa's poetry. Poetess used >religious< words and phrases to create her lyrical landscapes and poetical metaphors. The Franciscan ideas and themes of all poetical volumes [written by Kusek] give a value of *holiness* to the Universe in Kusek's poetry. In her poetry, the word **bread** possesses special sacral character. Kusek poetically pictured *bochen chleba* (a loaf of **bread**) as *żniwny opłatek* (the harvest wafer) [in poem *Żniwa za pasem* (Harvest Coming)]. In her poetry, the field becomes *kołyską chleba* (the cradle of **bread**) [in poem *Skowronia nuta* (The Skylarks-Note)] and, in metaphorical (figurative) meaning, the field is also *the cradle of Christ*. The poem *Modlitwa Ziemi* (The Earth's Prayer) is an example of deification of Sun: *Wyciąga Ziemia ręce do Nieba* (The Earth raises >the hands< to the Heaven). That image of praying Earth reminds us of a praying priest. The poem was inspired by the *Pater noster*. The poetical form of >lyrical prayer<, which was used by poetess in that lyric, brings the mood of religious dignity to the *Modlitwa Ziemi*. In Kusek's poetry, the personification and deification of the Universe is connected with religious doctrine of **the World's principles**. The anthropomorphous Cosmos >with human face< and human attributes is probably an artistic form of the cult of the man in analysed poetry.

Lyrical world of **Kusek's poetry is picturesque and musical**. Among various poetical phrases, the dominating ones are epithets. The adjective *czarny* (black) dominates among >coloured< epithets in Kusek's collections of poems. The adjective *złoty* (gold) is also popular in poetry written by the poetess. The epithets which are associated with summer [e.g.: *field-*, *harvest-*, *meadow-*] or with nature [e.g.: *cloudy-*, *rainy-*] appear in all volumes of her poems. In that poetry, the colours coexist with the sounds, and we all may admire the synesthesia of colours and sounds [e.g. in her lyrical poem *Łąka* (Meadow) from volume *Barwy lata* (The Summer Colours)] because Kusek's poetry is >a translation< from *language of feelings* to *figurative language of colours and sounds*. In that aspect, lyrics written by Karolina Kusek are related to poetical creations of Kazimiera Hłakowiczówna and Joanna Kulmowa.

Reading the volumes of Kusek's poetry, we can have the impression that the *summer landscapes* created by the poetess are only cheerful, joyful and harmonious. The penetrating of the poems reveals that the Universe is more complicated than we all think. And a reader of this poetry detects **an-**

guish, pain and sadness in the Cosmos and simultaneously notices **the passing of the Universe**. The poetess often endows her landscapes with emotional charge of existential questions. **The existential anxieties of the man** are often presented in Kusek's lyrics [e.g. in her poems *Drzewo* (*A Tree*) and *Powiedz?!* (*Say?!*)]. In the both of those lyrics, the Speaker [in a poem] stresses an anxieties of the man who lives at present in the world of modern civilization. The poem *Stara chata* (*An Old Cottage*) belongs to the same type of lyric. The existential anxieties presented in the beautiful poem *Wnuczko, wiosenko moja...* (*Granddaughter, My Little Spring...*) are connected with famous poem *Légende* written by a French poet-symbolist [of the 19th century] – Jules Laforgue. Sometimes the lyrical Speaker of Kusek's poems describes **the agonizing and painful experiences of the man** [e.g. in her poem *Rumianki* (*The Camomile*)].

In 1996, Karolina Kusek published her poems in **the volume of autobiographical poems *Z babcią za rękę*** (*Holding Grandma's Hand*). Ryszard Waksmund [1996, p.38], one of Polish famous modern scholars, has stated that a reader introduced to Polish poetry may perceive or may discover *coś nowego, odkrywczego* (*something new and original*), and simultaneously [*coś*] *jakby znajomego* (*something well-known*) in that Kusek's poetical volume [1996]. In Waksmund's opinion, the poems of that volume (as lyrical declaration of grandma's love for her grandchildren) have entered into the circle of *family and native tradition of poetry*. However, Zbigniew Baran [2001, nr 5, pp. 18 – 20, 2002, nr 1, pp. 10 – 13] has interpreted the poems of that volume as philosophical *>opus<*. Karolina Kusek is metaphorically called *Dama z Wrocławia* (*The Lady from Wrocław*) by the Nowy Sącz enthusiast and researcher of Polish literature in his essay [Z. Baran, 2001, nr 5, p. 18]. That metaphoric name of poetess [*Dama* (*The Lady*)] explains Kusek's high position in *>the Pantheon<* of modern Polish poets. Simultaneously, the identification of *the Poetess from Wrocław* with *>aristocracy of Polish poets<* has stressed the highest quality of her poetical art.

In that poetical volume [*Z babcią za rękę* (*Holding Grandma's Hand*)], *the Poetess from Wrocław* excellently as well as explicitly and passionately illustrated **women's issues** and **women's experience** in contemporary family. Kusek's poems present **Jung's archetype of the Great Mother** and show that woman (together with her family) lives in the unique space: in *Arcadian country* [relating to old Greek myths and Sicilian myths] beautifully blending in with picturesque landscapes of river valleys, mountain rang-

es, flower gardens and orchards, with cultivated fields and green meadows, with trees (lindens, poplars and willows), and with relicts of old civilization (with wooden figures [of Christ Sorrowful, the Holy Virgin and Saints] carved by village artists, wooden windmills and wells, apiaries with wooden hives, scarecrows). The archetype of the Great Mother exists in several variations in poetry of that volume written by Kusek [e.g. in her poems: *Babcia* (*The Grandma*), *Lipa* (*A Linden*), and also in her poems: *Lato u babci* (*A Summer at Grandma's*), *Pole* (*Field*) etc.]:

*Babcia ma tak białe włosy
jakby je przyprószyły płatki
wszystkich jej zim...
(Grandma has hair as white as snow-flakes of all her winters...)
(Babcia / The Grandma)*

*[Babcia]
stała w ogrodzie, za płotem,
listkami dłoni powiewająca...
([Grandma] stood in the flower-garden and she waved her leaved
hands...)
(Babcia / The Grandma)*

*A ta lipa wam śpiewała
tak jak niania nad kołyską.
(And that linden sang to you as a nanny [sings] to baby, near the
cradle.)
(Lipa / A Linden)*

Beautiful poem *Moja ty... (My Little One...)*, published in the volume *Z babcią za rękę (Holding Grandma's Hand)*, is especially important in poetry of *the Lady from Wrocław*. It is an echo of >lyrical phrases< used in *Treny (Laments / Threnodies)* by Jan Kochanowski, the most famous and greatest poet of the Renaissance Period in Poland. Using the Kochanowski's phrases, Karolina Kusek as the poetess – mother-in-law lamenting the loss of beloved son-in-law and simultaneously as the poetess calling her granddaughter – Muse [Erato, the muse of love poetry], compared metaphorically herself to this *Great Polish Poet*.

Karolina Kusek's Arcadian landscapes with >Polish< trees (lindens, poplars, willows), and with relicts of old civilization (with wooden figures [of Christ Sorrowful, the Holy Virgin and Saints], wooden windmills and with scarecrows) are comparable to the other landscapes appeared in Polish poetry and painting. Especially, **the linden(s)** is a well-known literary motif in Polish poetry [e.g.: in epigram *Na lipę (The Linden)* written by Jan Kochanowski – *the Poet of Linden Trees*, in Lucjan Rydel's lyrical poem *Wstań pieśni!... (Song, Get up!...)*, etc.]. The poem *Lipa (The Linden)* written by *the Poetess from Wrocław* may be excellently connected with the poetical declaration of Juliusz Słowacki, the greatest Polish poet of the Romantic Era, in his poem *Podróż do Ziemi Świętej z Neapolu (Travelling from Naples to the Holy Land, pieśń VI / song VI)*, and with a lyric *Lipy (The Lindens)* written by Leopold Staff.

The lyrical Speaker of Kusek's poem *Lipa (The Linden)* remember the poems those ...

..... *pisał w cieniu lipy*
Jan, poeta z Czarnolasu.
 (..... *were written by Jan, the poet of Czarnolas, under the linden tree.*)

In the poem, the readers may hear the echo of Juliusz Słowacki's poetical declaration: *Lubiłem lipę, co nad sławnym Janem... (I liked the linden tree that [shaded] over the Famous Jan's [= Jan Kochanowski's] head...)* as well as the words of the Speaker in Leopold Staff's lyric: *Od czterech wdzięcznych wieków i dla wiecznej chwały, // (...) // Wszystkie kwitnące słodko lipy w Polsce całej // Pachną imieniem Twoim, Kochanowski Janie... (Since the grateful four centuries, all Polish linden trees, that are in sweet flower, have the fragrant and lovely smell of your name, Beloved Jan Kochanowski, for your eternal poetical glory...).*

The lyrical views on love as well as on passing and death presented by the poetess in her poem *Żniwna para (Harvesting Lovers)* are important in Kusek's poetry. The personified *Wheat* and *Poppy* as the stereotyped literary figures of **the tragical lovers** in that poem may be connected with heroes of the famous literary works in European literature, with *Tristram (Tristan)* and *Ysolde (Isolde)* – the tragical lovers of Arthurian romance and with title-heroes of Shakespeare's tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*.

A joyful mood of happiness in the Universe is coloured with tone of death [see e.g.: the last verses of the lyric *Żniwna para* (*Harvesting Lovers*)]. The poetical phrase: [*pszenica i mak*] *pójdą wnet... pod kosę* ([*wheat and poppy*] *will go >under the scythe<*) associates univocally with **the symbolism of death** in Polish (and European) culture. The personification of *the Death* in Polish (and European) artistic culture is known as a skeleton with the scythe (as its attribute). The death is often presented in the flowers symbolism [see e.g.: the painting *Słonecznik* (*A Sunflower*) painted by Wojciech Weiss (1905), the fairy tale *O słonecznikach* (*Sunflowers*) written by Tadeusz Ruciński (1991)].

The themes of passing or death often are the subject of poetical reflection in that poetry [e.g. in poems: *Dzika róża* (*The Briar-Rose*), *Kamień* (*Stone*), *Odchodzenie lata* (*Summer Passing*)]. That reflection sometimes evokes the thought about ugliness [e.g. in poem *Maska Ziemi?* (*A Mask of the Earth?*)]. In beautiful Karolina Kusek's poetry, the Cosmos is only *the shadow of Eden*.

[.....]

Poetess created new and perfect model of children's lyrics. Her poetical volumes are inspired by religious conception of the Universe and her lyrics are close to religious poems of Polish poets as Kazimiera Hłakowiczówna, Anna Kamieńska, Janusz Stanisław Pasierb, Leopold Staff, and Paweł Heintsch, Janusz Artur Ihnatowicz, Zbigniew Jankowski, Wacław Oszejca and Jan Twardowski. **Lyrical visions** of Kusek are often deeply religious and her **faith** is often deeply visionary.

Karolina Kusek, the shamanic poetess and creatress of modern Polish lyrical poetry, is able to fascinate and to hypnotize the lovers of her poems. She is a philosophical poetess and simultaneously *>a sensitive philosopher<*. Her poetry is full of erudite associations of ideas, attractive connections and reflections on art, beauty and creativity, and also relations with Polish (and European) culture as well as artistic symbols and literary metaphors. Although the analysed poems are strongly rooted in the tradition of Polish culture (poetry, painting, music) and Polish philosophical reflection, unique-

ness of lyrical poetry written by Kusek may be also appreciated by European readers of poetry.

Nowy Sącz, 16th March 2008

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