

Beata K. Obsulewicz<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2103-9484>

The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin

beata.obsulewicz-niewinska@kul.pl**Rafał J. Pastwa**<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9470-5156>

The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin

rafal.pastwa@kul.pl

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Sympathy in the Works of Maria Konopnicka – a Category Originating in the Gospel or an Example of a Secularised Attitude to Social Relations

ABSTRACT

The year 2022 has been declared the Year of Maria Konopnicka by the Sejm of the Republic of Poland. The celebration of the 180th anniversary of her birth should be an occasion to reread her rich legacy and to look at various aspects of her life. The unique nature of Konopnicka's work, as well as reductionist attempts to approach her biography, led the authors of this study to find a bridge connecting her life and work with the Gospel message from which she drew inspiration in the category of somatic sympathy. The philosophical category of somatic sympathy (*sympphysis*) has been adopted on theological grounds, and its depth and universal character make it also transferable to literary studies, such as somatopoetics. This article proves that the category of somatic sympathy can be fully understood through the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth, and that it is one of the characteristics of Maria Konopnicka's literary works.

KEYWORDS: Gospel, Maria Konopnicka, secularization, literature, somatic sympathy, sympathy

STRESZCZENIE

Współczucie w twórczości Marii Konopnickiej – kategoria wywodząca się z Ewangelii czy przykład zsekularyzowanego podejścia do relacji społecznych?

Rok 2022 został ogłoszony przez Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej Rokiem Marii Konopnickiej. Obchody 180. rocznicy jej urodzin powinny być okazją do ponownego odczytania bogatej spuścizny autorki *Roty* i przyjrzenia

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się różnym aspektom jej życia. Wyjątkowy charakter twórczości Konopnickiej, a także redukcjonistyczne próby podejścia do jej biografii, skłoniły autorów niniejszego opracowania do znalezienia pomostu łączącego jej życie i twórczość z przesłaniem Ewangelii, z którego czerpała inspirację w kategorii cielesnego współodczuwania. Filozoficzna kategoria cielesnego współodczuwania (*sympphysis*) została przyjęta na gruncie teologicznym, a jej głębia i uniwersalny charakter sprawiają, że można ją przenieść także na grunt literaturoznawstwa, np. somatopoetyki. Niniejszy artykuł dowodzi, że kategoria cielesnego współodczuwania może być w pełni rozumiana poprzez osobę i dzieło Jezusa z Nazaretu, a także, że jest ona jedną z cech charakterystycznych dla twórczości literackiej Marii Konopnickiej.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: Ewangelia, Maria Konopnicka, sekularyzacja, literatura, cielesne współodczuwanie, współczucie

Maria Konopnicka's activity overlapped the 19th and 20th centuries. At that transitory time, there was a growing shift in the positioning of religion in public discourse and its importance in shaping social relations. The writer observed world view changes leading towards secularization, which can be defined as the perception of reality without the application of religious interpretations (Berger, 2005, p. 150). More and more often in research, not only in literary studies, Konopnicka and her artistic legacy are attributed an important role in the promotion of secularization ideas (Kienzler, 2014). The reflection presented in this article stems from a reconsideration of the inspirations prompting Konopnicka's insightful interest in the human body and in people of the "lower classes," in addition to an intention to verify findings that perceive this interest as a simple fascination with the ideological assumptions and aesthetics of naturalism.

The purpose of this article is not to analyze the theories and processes of secularization, but to provide an interpretation of Konopnicka's work based on an in-depth analysis of her selected writings. The philosophical and theological category of somatic sympathy has been used, with the conviction that it is applicable to the field of literary studies. The authors attempt to justify that the category of somatic sympathy can be read in full through the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth, and that it is one of the characteristics of Maria Konopnicka's literary works. The acclaimed writer drew on the message of the Gospels as an essential component of her perception and understanding of the world. When speaking of the Gospel message, the authors want to point out that the writer derived the meanings and spiritual dimension of her creative expressions from the history of the presence of the Son of God among men, His Incarnation, the commandment to love rather than looking for direct quotations, symbols

and tropes in her legacy. The authors therefore look for the category under study in the superadded senses, not in the lexical implementation of the work.

The year 2022 has been declared the Year of Maria Konopnicka by the Sejm of the Republic of Poland. The celebration of the 180th anniversary of her birth should be an occasion to reread her rich legacy and to look at various aspects of her life. Maria Konopnicka née Wasilowska (1842–1910) is rightly regarded as one of the most important authors of Polish poetry and prose (especially novellas) at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, a translator, a talented publicist, including one of the pioneers of Polish reportage, a literary critic, a careful and keen observer of social life and an interesting author of letters.¹ It is also important to note her contribution to the development of children's literature and the special role she assigned to the young audience among the wide readership of her works. Konopnicka's extraordinary personality made her a symbol of the struggle for the dignity of women and their equal rights, but also a tenacious defender of the rights of all those oppressed by the economic system (children, common folk, the sick, prisoners) and the political system (Poles living under the Prussian partition, suffering persecution for the use of the Polish language in liturgy and school, and inhabitants of lands annexed by Russia who were connected with Polish culture). Her private life, including her family life, brought closer by the editing of her epistolography in the past decades of the 20th century (Konopnicka, 2005, 2010; Nowak, 2010), has recently become the subject of much discussion, contributing to a shift in emphasis towards reflection on 19th-century mores read from a contemporary perspective.

The year of Konopnicka, a woman of great courage of thought, exceptional attentiveness of insight and a surprisingly innovative writing technique, becomes an opportunity to ask questions about the spiritual dimension of her work. It is also one that, on closer inspection, calls for the analysis and interpretation of premises drawn from the Bible, more specifically the New Testament. The authors assume that one of the most important, most characteristic manifestations of Konopnicka's artistic imagination is the category of sympathy, and the way it manifests itself leads to a focus on the body, the most obvious medium of encounter with people and the world and at the same time, for cultural reasons, often difficult to accept.

The category of somatic sympathy is understood as deep insight and a special kind of attentiveness, based on the experience of having a living

1 The most accurate current state of knowledge about the biography of M. Konopnicka is discussed by I. Węgrzyn (2011).

body, fragile in the sense of being vulnerable to the passage of time, external and internal stimuli, feeling pain, fear and contingency, which allows man to express himself as an individual in relation to other people and the creation, and recalls the existence of a field of moral responsibility of man for persons and other beings – especially the weaker and dependent ones – just by virtue of the fact that they have a living body.

The authors draw on Edith Stein's phenomenological category of deep empathy and Ralph R. Acampora's category of somatic sympathy, symphysis, which in their view have their origin in the Gospels and are revealed in the work of Maria Konopnicka as well.² They are aware that the human person is a bodily-spiritual composite, and that focusing on somatic sympathy does not mean overlooking the momentous role of spiritual sympathy and sympathy at the psychological level. Instead, their reflection is an attempt to show that somatic sympathy can provide a universal basis for sharing sorrows with another person, but also with other creatures. Such an optic is fully justified by, among other things, recent research by biologists and anthropologists (see de Waal, 2019). The common denominator in the experience of having a living body can lead to building attentiveness and seeing the suffering, the poor and the complex existential relationships involving human persons. The privileged bodily dimension is justified in its universal character, independent of era and culture, with the event of Incarnation of Christ as its focal point. The recognition of the role of the body and of somatic sympathy makes it possible to emphasize that, from the Christian perspective, through the Incarnation of Christ, the encounter in the living body already has a salvific character.

According to the first hypothesis formulated by the authors of this study, somatic sympathy understood in this way, and in consequence also a particular kind of attentiveness to others, finds its full meaning and radiance when we include the work and person of Jesus of Nazareth in its interpretation. The selected Gospel pericopes confirm the profound meaning and significance of this symphysis of Jesus of Nazareth, who became Christ for believers, with other human beings, especially the poor, those experiencing unfulfillment and injustice, and with the creation. The Gospels are the pinnacle of deep sympathy. This symphysis, the somatic sympathy, originates in the event of the Incarnation of the Son of God and is completed in the central Paschal event, i.e., the death on the Cross and the Resurrection.

2 Issues of the phenomenology of the body are becoming an area of increasing investigation, especially in relation to Husserl and his disciples, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jan Patočka and Emmanuel Levinas. This also applies to the area of experiencing the body, and the phenomenon of the living (one's own) body, which according to the thinkers overlap with the results of cognitive research. Cf. Chojnacka, 2021; Kowalczyk, 2009; Machnacz, 2010; Maciejczak, 2001; Pękala, 2004; Pokropski, 2008, 2011.

The authors also put forward another hypothesis, according to which the source of attentiveness in Maria Konopnicka's literary works is the Gospel message. The analysis of her selected works demonstrates that the writer had a deep understanding of the Gospel message, creating literature in which the category of somatic sympathy can be brought out. Drawing from the Gospels should be understood as a starting point in perceiving and understanding the world, which is manifested in the fact that her writing makes deeper references to the words and work of Jesus of Nazareth, rather than merely cultural ones limited to the superficial evocation of biblical passages, figures and symbols.³ Konopnicka's focus on the message of the Gospels is resonates in her literary texts.

The category of somatic sympathy

According to the authors of the study, the adoption of philosophical categories such as Somatic Sympathy or symphysis is possible in literary studies, which can foster a deeper view of man, the created world and Christianity in contemporary culture.

On a theological level, the philosophical category of sympathy is presented contemporaneously by Bartholomew, Patriarch of Constantinople, in the context of the protection of the created world, and was evoked in Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato si'*. Bartholomew calls the degradation of the natural environment a sin, and defines the misappropriation of nature as a sin against God (cf. Franciszek, 2015, p. 8). Pope Francis therefore appreciated the ecumenical patriarch's reflections on the call to see the world as *a sacrament of communion with God* and neighbor in a global perspective (Pastwa, 2020, p. 47). The respect shown for the world and for created beings, and the harmonious relationship with them, was described by the Archbishop of Constantinople as *sympathy*. Pope Francis interprets this category as follows: "It is our humble conviction that the divine and the human meet in the slightest detail in the seamless garment of God's creation, in the last speck of dust of our planet" (Franciszek, 2015, p. 9). The point of departure in such a perspective is both the origin of man and of the whole created world from the same Creator and the perfect fulfilment of the mystery of Christ, which has its origin in the Incarnation and is completed in the paschal mystery (Skalický, 2001, p. 29).

Understood in this way, the category of sympathy is not limited to its spiritual character – it is primarily of a corporeal nature, since it is at the

3 On the various connections between religious issues and literary studies, see the comments of B. Przy muszała (2009, pp. 243–245).

somatic level that man, like other beings, experiences physical imperfection, uncertainty, vulnerability and transience. It must therefore be recognized that the community of the living body in the phenomenological sense can be sufficient for a sympathetic concern for other persons and the rest of creation. This kind of somatic sympathy – an awareness of the symphysis with other animate entities – can provide a bridge in human relationships with God and the created world in contemporary culture, without neglecting the Christian message. For it is not about momentary compassion or one-off actions in favor of people and animals in distress, but an ongoing physical experience of *symplysis* involving an attentive reading of responsibility for others (cf. Acampora, 2013, pp. 144–146). At the same time, it is understood as being *sympathetic with something*, and not *being sympathetic for something* (cf. Acampora, 2013, pp. 152).

The category of *somatic sympathy* is taken up by Ralph R. Acampora, who, in analyzing the rational attempt to describe and interpret a morality that transcends the human species, proposes an existential and phenomenological approach. These are based on the experience of having a living body, experiencing physical pain, fear, danger, anxiety and the fragility of existence – an experience shared by human persons and other creatures (Acampora, 2006, pp. 1–5). As such, this somatic sociability broadens the field of human moral responsibility to include vulnerable beings, whether human persons or other creatures (Acampora, 2013). It is not necessary here to justify the need to extend moral concern to weaker persons and beings, since the point of departure is made to be the origin of the world and man from the same divine spirit (Smulewicz-Zucker, 2012). In Acampora's approach, somatic sympathy represents a distinct, somatic kind of sensitivity signifying a sympathetic symphysis with the corporeal world, with all the existential effects of being in a body, fragile and transient, capable of feeling the physical pain and anxiety of existence, threat and uncertainty, and dependence on the stronger (2012, p. 242). Nowadays, it seems important to rediscover the experience of the body that operates within the world, where the subject would not be reduced to pure consciousness (cf. Pokropski, 2011). The experience of the living body can contribute to making modern man aware of the existence of complex social relations, but also of the relationship between man and the natural world (cf. Pastwa, 2020, p. 41–42). It can also contribute to a reading of cultural texts where the body is the starting point in understanding human existence,⁴ which,

4 Cognitive approaches in linguistics use the concept of the “embodied mind.” According to M. Johnson, the basis of this assumption is the recognition that human thinking and linguistic meanings have their origin in the fusion of the human body with that which surrounds it. Therefore, the body's relationship with the environment, including other corporeal beings, leads to

without the attentiveness that comes from deep insight, is constantly in danger of being overlooked, condemned to extreme individualism and the dictatorship of the stronger. The experience of having a living body is the starting point for understanding the meaning of existence, rather than escaping from the search for it, which ends in confusion and doubt. Such diagnoses are already being made in the public, cultural sphere, including media studies, and humanistic education. They are intended to lead towards the construction of deep interpersonal relationships and the teaching of deep compassion proposed as a remedy for the narcissism and market mentality of media users (Nussbaum, 2010, pp. 37–38). Thus, somatic sympathy can be a solution to the identity crisis of the individual in contemporary culture, as well as the restoration of proper social relations and the relationship with the created world, where the dominant factor will not be force and indifference, but the awareness of a responsible and attentive community of shared destiny resulting from the universal experience of having a living body. From the Christian perspective, man, like the rest of creation, has its origin in the action of the Creator, and the human body, thanks to the work of the incarnate, crucified and risen Christ, is destined for resurrection. The existence of the natural world is good in itself, without it having to be useful to man. Hence, the category of somatic sympathy understood in this way can be a starting point in the dialogue of Christianity with those currents of contemporary culture that seek social justice and the protection of the natural world outside of the Christian and evangelical perspective.

Focusing on the dimension concerning human persons, Edith Stein emphasized that only empathy, a kind of deep sympathy, makes it possible for a person to express themselves as an individual, while remaining in relation to others (cf. Stein, 2014, pp. 143–153). Thus, some kind of empathy, based on the corporeality of the human being, which allows the human being to express itself more fully, constitutes the key to remaining in relation to others. The pinnacle of this empathy, which can be described as a symphysis, and at the same time a new beginning for the expression of man as an individual, became the Incarnation of the Son of God. The fullness and novelty originating in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ are manifested in a special way on the pages of the Gospels in His works and words. The Gospels devote much space to the poor and the weakest. It is they who are often the protagonists of the pericopes. The empathetic actions

experiencing the world through the body and the discovery of the meaning of words. For Johnson, intersubjective somatic sensing becomes the key to explicating the embodied meanings that arise from the close relationship between humans and the world. Our symphysis with the world motivates meaning, language, thought and artistic creativity. See – Johnson, 2015.

and words of the Master of Nazareth recorded in the pages of the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John became an inspiration for philosophers, artists and men of words of all ages.

A kind of deep compassion as sharing pain with an innocent sufferer or a person who is unable to overcome physical or mental suffering, poverty, loneliness, experiencing violence and unjust judgment also appears in Polish culture and piety. The term “co-sorrowing” has become present on the occasion of Passion services, where Mary’s co-sorrowing means participation in the passion of her Son. In connection with the sermons dedicated to the passion of Christ, those concerning the co-sorrowing of the Mother of the Lord arose (*Kazania o Męce i Śmierci*, 1916). Co-sorrowing, then, signifies sharing the other person’s sorrows, attempting to take over some of the pain, misfortune, relief of suffering, sympathetic accompaniment in a difficult situation, and is based on reflection on the Passion of the Lord, whose Body was given up for sinners. Here again, the starting point for the depth of this compassion is the suffering incarnate God-Man.

Compassio cum Christo and Compassio Mariae

In the religious culture, literature and art of the medieval period, much attention was paid to the Mother standing beneath the Cross of the Son, as well as to Christ’s physical suffering during the Passion. In the field of literature and iconography, the *Compassio Mariae* was primarily focused on spiritual suffering, and this depiction of the co-suffering of the Mother of Jesus was intended to contribute to the faithful’s participation in it through meditation and prayer. The theme of Mary’s spiritual co-suffering with her crucified Son formed the basis of imagery in many works of Polish medieval literature and art, including architecture. This biblical scene became the inspiration for numerous interpretations of religious cultural texts of the period. The *Compassio Mariae*, with its emphasis on spiritual suffering in particular, is deeply rooted in the Gospel pericopes, including the scene of the Prophecy of Simeon (Luke 2: 34–35) and the finding of Jesus in the temple (Luke 2: 43–51) (cf. Rybicki, 2009, pp. 13–15). It is worth noting, however, that spiritual suffering is experienced by the human being “in their body,” hence the physical dimension of the pain of the Mother of Jesus, whose presence at key and dramatic moments in the Son’s messianic activity is attested by the Gospels, should not be overlooked. In many cases, the art of past eras, made evident and at the same time suggested the extent of her spiritual suffering through the expression of Mary’s bodily pain, visible in her facial expression and figure.

Compassio cum Christo, on the other hand, must be read in the key of the physical suffering of the Son of God. As A. Rybicki argues, this corresponds to the basic premise of Christian asceticism, where the verse of the Epistle to the Galatians is a model: “I have been crucified with Christ” (Gal. 2:19). The theologian emphasizes: “It should be noted that medieval man interpreted the crucifixion scene in two ways: either focusing on the salvific aspect of Jesus’ physical passion or describing its individual details in minute detail” (Rybicki, 2009, p. 14). The theme of Christ’s spiritual suffering was not popularized in the medieval era. The focus on the physical dimension of Christ’s suffering is rooted in the Gospel accounts of the Passion. His scourged, stripped and crucified body is the body of a human being, and therefore indicates that through the communion of the possession of a living body there is a path of universal and thus comprehensible sympathy for people of all eras and cultures. Just as universal as the experience of physical pain, fragility, sense of threat and fear. Thus, it can be assumed that, from this perspective, “the Cross is the essence of the Gospel because it is open to human pain and suffering, to hardship and all loss, and especially to the loneliness and death that beset man” (cf. Witczyk, 2002, p. 215).

Sympathy as the category originating in the Gospel

The Incarnation of Christ represents a particular utterance of God and the fullness of God’s covenant with man, which reached their climax in the paschal mystery. The Incarnation of the Son of God signifies not only an entrance into human history, but an immersion into the communion of corporeality with man and creation. This communion achieves a particular kind of humbling in the life of Jesus: a bodily and existential sharing of destiny with the “least of these.” It begins from the moment of his birth in a humble cave, in an atmosphere of uncertainty and even threat to life.

Jesus’ commitment to those most affected by poverty and injustice is reflected in his radical teaching to his disciples. At the same time, Jesus shared the plight of the poor during his public activity (Luke 9: 58). As J. Kudasiewicz notes, the note of poverty already introduced in the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke will run throughout the work. This “gentle” evangelist-editor definitely formulates Jesus’ call to poverty more strongly than Matthew (Luke 6: 20; Matt. 5: 3). In Luke’s version, only absolute poverty guarantees blessing and inheritance of the kingdom of God (cf. Kudasiewicz, 1999, p. 266). Thus, in Luke’s version, Jesus’ call is valid not only in religious terms, but above all in social ones (cf. Kudasiewicz, 1999, p. 266). By

using the formula “sell everything” in the answer given to the rich young man (Luke 18: 22; cf. Mark 10: 21, Matt. 19: 21), the evangelist Luke is more radical than the other synoptics. A similar radicalism, and therefore a proper consequence of Jesus’ poverty, applies to the calling of the apostles who, following the Teacher, left “everything” (Luke 12: 33; 14: 33; Luke 5: 11; cf. Matt. 4: 22, Mark 1: 20) (cf. Kudasiewicz, 1999, p. 267). In the biblical scholar’s view, this approach of Luke’s “rehabilitates and affirms” the poor and disadvantaged, who, in the mentality of both the addressees of his work at the time and of many of his contemporary audiences, are not a source of special concern or interest (cf. Kudasiewicz, 1999, p. 268).

A distinctive kind of sympathy between Jesus of Nazareth and the category of the poor and the last is discerned by G. Ravasi. By reaching out to the biblical and existential reality of the Nativity of Jesus, he points to circumstances proving that it was an event full of suffering, which is also reflected in certain currents in literature and art. “For Christmas was, and to this day remains, a day of suffering” (cf. Ravasi, 2004, p. 196). He points out that the scenes in the Infancy Gospels indicate that the Son of God, since His birth, shared a fate with the weakest and suffering, with exiles or those condemned to refugee camps. The family of Jesus, emphasizes the Italian biblical scholar, belongs to the category of the poor and the “last,” which is evidenced by the sacrifice of the doves and the fact that none of the priests received Mary with the reverence proper to the aristocratic women of Jerusalem. At the same time, the poor Son of a poor mother is seen by the “a poor one of the Lord” – the elderly man Simeon (cf. Ravasi, 2004, p. 197). The scholar suggests that in order to encounter Christ, it is necessary to step out of the atmosphere of warmth, security and comfort, for the true heroes of Christmas are those in crisis of homelessness, all condemned to loneliness, a difficult old age, humiliated by poverty and hatred, refugees and those afflicted by serious illness (cf. Ravasi, 2004, p. 198). In addition, Ravasi also highlights the fact that Jesus will not have a home of his own for the rest of his life (cf. Ravasi, 2004, p. 196), and that after being taken down from the Cross he is laid in a tomb given by Joseph of Arimathea.

Jesus’ sensitivity, central to the social attitudes of Christians, is revealed in numerous parables, however, the cultural text with the most universal significance is the parable of the “Samaritan” (Luke 10: 30–37), which at the same time responds to the question of *who my neighbor is* (Luke 10: 25–29). The Samaritan becomes the neighbor of the one who suffers, and over time tradition has come to see Jesus as the image of the good Samaritan (cf. Ravasi, 2004, p. 204–205).

Scattered throughout the Gospels are many scenes that testify to Jesus’ uncompromising sympathy with the most fragile and those condemned to marginalization. Remarkable in this aspect is Jesus’ perceptiveness and

attentiveness to others, especially the poor and marginalized. The scene of the healing of the leper found in the account of Mark (Mark 1: 40–45) is particularly significant in this context. The healing takes place through touch and not at a distance. Jesus' response to the suffering and plight of both the poor and those in distress is immediate and uncompromising, even when it contradicts the logic of the crowd (Mark 10: 46–52; Luke 18: 35–43; Luke 19: 1–10; John 8: 3–11). The Teacher of Nazareth, in his sympathetic sensitivity, sees beyond his surroundings. The pericope about the poor widow with its preceding context (Mark 12: 41–44) may serve as an example. Jesus, moved by human tragedy and suffering, takes action without waiting to be asked, as in the case of the poor widow at the city gate in Nain when he raised her only son from the dead. It was the sight of a woman torn by pain and despair that provided the impulse for Jesus to stop (Luke 7: 11–17). What seems particularly significant in analyzing the sympathetic sensitivity of Jesus of Nazareth is the attentiveness to the individuality of human fate.

The nineteenth-century search for an answer to the question of who my neighbor is

One of the postulates that the representatives of Polish Positivism (such as Bolesław Prus, Eliza Orzeszkowa, Henryk Sienkiewicz, Aleksander Świętochowski and Maria Konopnicka) included in their program for the modernization of society was democratization, i.e. placing emphasis on noticing the need for the coexistence and cooperation of different social groups, which had to involve the recognition and acceptance of people and their different roles, functions, social status, etc. There was a need to find a universally accepted common denominator in understanding the essence of humanity. Such a denominator represented, without doubt, the pure Gospel tradition – the deeds and words of Jesus of Nazareth, one that transcended the class barriers, was accepted by the ecclesial tradition and practice of the time, questioned by some in the circles of the young intelligentsia (Cieślak, 2010). Even the most anti-clerical of the generation born ca. 1840 regarded the Gospel with respect, while the parish constituted a model for the idea of organic work, where everyone could feel needed and useful, and where any neglect would hurt the whole community (Świętochowski, 1873). The evangelical vision inspired the initiatives of works defined by their charitable character (which, *nota bene*, followed a positivist programme).⁵ The increased active interest in the people of

5 These included the works of Edmund Bojanowski, the initiatives of Fr. Honorat Koźmiński, the establishment of women's religious congregations (the Sisters of the Holy Family of

lower classes stemmed, among other things, from an inadequate or even mistaken perception of “who my neighbor is.” It should be emphasized here that the 19th century saw the number of cases of servants being, for example, treated on a par with animals – social norms, such as a sense of shame, applied neither in their company nor when interacting with them. Upper classes were known for their disdainful perception of the peasants or Jews, regarded as people who were unworthy of being granted full rights.

Maria Konopnicka and the sympathetic approach

Sympathy is always an individual issue, founded on a person’s private history. In the case of Maria Wasiłowska, it may have come from family tradition – the religious model of home education, shaped by a father who highly valued and, it seems, deeply understood the Bible, was certainly important.⁶ Education at the school of Benedictine Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament in Warsaw strengthened her ties with the Holy Book. It is difficult to say how the young Maria received these lessons, but without a doubt her knowledge of the Bible can be assessed as at least good. It is known that in her later years, as an adult, she traveled around Europe with the Bible (Biliński, 2015), and references to biblical content appear throughout her work.⁷ Regardless of whether she treated the Bible as a reservoir of motifs of cultural bearing, or whether it was an Inspired Book for her, her work convinces us that this Book and the type of sensitivity characteristic of it shaped the ethical code she followed.

Previous literary and historical studies assume that the focus on the low-life area and the unique way of presenting protagonists in Konopnicka’s prose is primarily the result of an aesthetic choice (Brodzka, 1958, pp. 55–66). It is true that the postulate of observation from nature, so close to her, as a way of searching for a path to truth is to be attributed to the

Nazareth, the Congregation of the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary), the creation of orphanages by religiously motivated aristocrats, and bequests of estates for social purposes. See – Olszewski, 1996, 2014; Obsulewicz-Niewińska, 2008.

- 6 “The atmosphere of our childhood was very different from that in which children usually live. Father of mine, a mystic, immensely religious, a solitary, devoted to his work and his children. He translated Pascal’s letters, his *Thoughts*, the *Psalms* of David and others, he did not however submit his works to print Almost a misanthrope, he brought us up with scarcely any feminine influence, reading to us *The Imitation of Christ*, a book which, like many of the gospels and biblical parables, was memorized by him in his first almost childhood” (Konopnicka, 1911, p. 4).
- 7 “In my wandering I carry with me: *The Bible*, *The Divine Comedy* and *Mister Thaddeus* ...” (Konopnicka, 1911, p. 4). *Mister Thaddeus* is a Polish national epic.

indications of the naturalist school (Bobrowska, 1984), and that it also contributed to the practice of seeing the multiple, often removed from the field of vision, difficult and violent existential situations. Another factor, that is, the choice of generational program optics, led Konopnicka to see a human being in need and suffering from some deprivation, waiting to be noticed and helped. It empowered her to see a particular person, regardless of social status, and enabled her to elevate that person's individual situation to the status of a symbol. Konopnicka had an unprejudiced vision of man. She shaped it thanks to the turns of fate, which gave her, belonging to the noble class, a chance to get to know people coming from the low and lowest spheres (rural or small-town population, proletariat or lumpenproletariat). The necessity to face financial deprivation, the experience of marital problems, including separation from her husband Jarosław (cf. Nowak, 2010), the position of a woman raising children alone and struggling with child-rearing problems (Magnone, 2011), must have developed in her an awareness of the difficulties faced by people of "different spheres" in social relations. This was an excellent school of empathy (see: Lanzoni, 2018, pp. 46–67; Davis, 2001; de Waal, 2019, pp. 71–122) and one must admit that Konopnicka made excellent use of it.

As it seems, it is necessary to supplement this aesthetic-biographical view with an evangelical aspect. Among Polish writers, Bolesław Prus earned the title of the "evangelical positivist" (see: Fita, 2008). The protagonists portrayed in Konopnicka's prose convince the reader that the author of *Miłosierdzie gminy* also deserves such a title.

As mentioned earlier, she was interested in insights into the human psyche, initiated by noticing a small element, an eye-catching detail (Ihnatowicz, 2004), which often later grew to become a symbol (cf. *Dym*, *Nasza szkoła*). As a result, her short narrative forms (novellas, short stories) sometimes take on the character of parables. The narrator's dialogue with the protagonist in the attitude of an attentive listener or quoting the character's statements is a kind of *symphysis*. Allowing the protagonist to self-present and giving voice to those who were not listened to or listened to only by representatives in the 19th century is also a form of the accepting sympathy⁸. In fact, *symphysis* in the case of the writer involves such

8 "Unprecedented in the literature of the period, the flexibility and discretion of the function of the sensitive narrator, who is unreservedly, emotionally and reflectively close to the characters, although not giving up an individual point of view, skillfully directing attention to the crucial moments of their experiences, was combined by the writer with a masterful presentation of the inner course of the thoughts of the protagonists themselves. For this purpose, she used the modulation of the speech of the narrator-witness, a speech that absorbs the thoughts of the characters, invisibly taking over their perspective, direction of attention, sphere of desires, fears..." (Brodzka, 1958, p. 363).

shaping of the narrative as to reveal at the same time what is personal and individual for the protagonist, and, through unconditional openness to the other man, allow what is universal in human experience to permeate. This is the case, for example, with the title protagonist Terka, who for years has been selling chickens around houses, an extremely poor woman whose sole purpose in life is – awkwardly revealed by her – to collect money for the chalice (Konopnicka, 1976b). The comparative approach tends to see Terka as a poor widow, throwing all her savings into the temple treasury (Mark 12: 41–44). Konopnicka's insistence on listening to what someone is expressing, rising above the communicative signals of linguistic structures, at the starting point often tainted by imperfection due to the characters' lack of education or familiarity, is an important artistic achievement of hers and a practical lesson of sympathy with one's neighbor.

Experience of corporeality and somatic sympathy

Until now, there has been no work in the field of somatopoetics⁹ devoted to Konopnicka's novellas. However, even a cursory review of her short stories reveals the fundamental importance in their depicted world of the body and corporeality seen in the categories proposed by R.R. Acampora.

"It is painful to look at the pain of others – but after all, that is what empathy is all about" (de Waal 2019, 111). Konopnicka repeatedly describes the old, damaged, helpless body and the disproportion between it and the consciousness that is at full strength. Old age, cruel in a world deprived of medical care, relying on the mercy and disfavor of the closest people in anticipation of death, is the subject of many Konopnicka's novellas, such as *Banasiowa* (1974b), *Miłosierdzie gminy* (1976a), *Urbanowa* (1974r), *U źródła* (1974s). The elderly who choose to live according to their idea (e.g., deciding against their social position to beg) become a torment to their children, because, as the writer shows, people judge the condition of the body according to social premises, trapped in conventional evaluations (*Panna Florentyna* [Konopnicka, 1974n]). The situation is similar with people who are sick. Bodily infirmity in the case of the poor poses a serious threat to the family budget, changes the relations between its members, often becomes a serious challenge to the strongest

9 Somatopoetics – after A. Łebkowska – is "the principles and ways of making the category of corporeality present in cultural discourses, especially in literature, as the relationship between language and the body, between the body and literature. Literature is looking for ways to express the body, and the study of literature is also looking for them. Thus, the body functions here as an interpretive category and as ... a research tool" (2011, p. 13).

of bonds (husband – wife, parents – children, children – household pets; *Nasza szkapą* [Konopnicka, 1974k]). Infertility is another corporeality-related issue that the writer subtly and unobtrusively looks at, noting the significant effects it can have on spouses and their social relationships (*Józefowa* [Konopnicka, 1974f]). A body poorly clothed, humiliated by lack of decent (adequate) clothing, neglected, exposed to the vagaries of the weather is the subject of *Ksawery* (Konopnicka, 1974h), *Urbanowa* and *Na werandzie* (Konopnicka, 1974l). Respect for the corpse of the suicidal Froim Porter, profaned by Jews, makes Lejba Rabinowicz defend the deceased, although such an act brings upon him exclusion from the community (*Jakton* [Konopnicka, 1974d]). The beaten and sick Kania, a woman of easy virtue, is taken in by Anusia just before she dies, driven by forgiveness and compassion. Thanks to Anusia's efforts, the disgraced Kania dies in peace, and her body regains its dignity (*Anusia* [Konopnicka, 1974a]). A Polish student uses his own body to cover a Jewish man named Mendel Gdański and his grandson from the massacre (*Mendel Gdański* [Konopnicka, 1974i]). Co-sorrowing with an abandoned child, leading to a death in flames, is the finale of *Dziady* (Konopnicka, 1974c), and the accumulation of traumas in the body after the death of her husband from frost and her child in a fire is felt by the nameless protagonist of *Na rynku* (Konopnicka, 1974j), who is crazed with despair. With this last story, it is worth mentioning that the novelist also extended the experience of *sympathy* to animals as beings with sensual, sensitive bodies. The image of the anguish of oxen led to death appears in *Na rynku*, a crane with a broken wing – in the early novella *Ultimus* (Konopnicka, 1974q). It is the dog that gets into the situation of the hungry, unfairly and cruelly judged by the satiated and bored judges of the village children in the short story titled *Z włamaniem* (Konopnicka, 1974t). A separate place in Konopnicka's novellas belongs to small prose devoted to prisoners – the short story *Pod prawem* (1974p), the series *Obrazki więzienne: Podług księgi* (1974o), *Onufer* (1974m), *Jeszcze jeden numer* (1974e) and the reportage *Za kratą* (1976c). The situation of people deprived of personal freedom, isolated in an artificial group, shows the narrator the value of the body as an optimal medium for meeting in the most intimate, including therapeutic, situations (presence, listening, praying together, touching). Where speech fails, encounter is possible through the universal language of the body (*Jeszcze jeden numer*). The work *Za kratą* is even an instruction on how to use one's body to serve others, to provide relief or support in anguish. The short story *Józik Srołacz* tells of the consequences of an unfortunate accident during farm work. As the doctor treats Józik's wounds after his hand was severed by the machine, at one point he asks the people present in the room to help with the operation.

‘Me, daddy!’ the child spoke in a pleading voice, and having slipped out of the corner, approached the bed, boldly taking the bloody bowl in his thin hands. For his strength it was a considerable weight, after all, the boy held it vigorously, gazing at Józik with wide-open eyes. ... at this moment the patient groaned again and opened his eyes. He opened, moved his mouth and, gaining consciousness with apparent difficulty, kept his gaze on the child. The child also stared, with his eyes wide open, stubbornly, as if captivated. Who knows what those two crossing gazes said to each other there, one with an expression of great, serious surprise and the other of mortal agony (Konopnicka, 1974g, p. 129).

The above excerpt reveals another feature that is important to Konopnicka’s way of reporting moments of the fullest sympathetic sympathy. In her descriptions of the human body, precise, often dispassionately blunt, revealing places far from the ideal of beauty, she unerringly senses the moment when, as the narrator, she must step back, refrain from commenting, when the relationship between sentient and sympathetic bodies is transformed into a kind of mystery.

Ally and gloss

Deep somatic sympathy in the works of Maria Konopnicka can be described as existential, far from superficial sentimentality and cloyingness. In such an attitude to the fragility of life, suffering and loneliness, she is close to many authors of ancient works considering the mystery of *compassio*. Her vision of the world was based on noticing the suffering, the poor and the complex relationships between individuals and the world of creatures. The source of such attentiveness of the writer was the Gospel message. She was able to “dissect” it into a series of images created according to the methods of the naturalistic school. However, the motivation for reaching for naturalistic conventions was not closed in the worldview of naturalism, but located at the center of the evangelical sensitivity to those in need, to see them as persons worthy of attention and often admiration. Worthy of an encounter. The choice of the subjects of the small prose was dictated by the encouragement, important for the positivists, of the “apotheosis of the anti-hero” (Bobrowska, 2003), but the consistency in dedicating her talent to people from marginalized social spheres in Konopnicka’s case goes far beyond generational inclinations or trends. As it seems, the writer stood to her contemporaries in the same place that Jesus of Nazareth took in relation to the protagonists of the Gospels. Of course, her gesture could only have been a gesture imitating Christ’s attitude. This is why her short texts,

if only read without prejudice, following the narrative flow carefully, are so emotionally and intellectually moving. They shake one out of indifference to his neighbors, and sympathizing with literary characters does not stop at the threshold of pity (see: Jauss, 1986, p. 178–191; Harold, 2000, p. 340–355; Pluciennik, 2002; Walton, 2015), but reveals the truth about the moral condition of the one who has entered the world depicted in the works.¹⁰

“Compassion deeply and rightly affects moral sensitivity” (Acampora, 2013, p. 155). Thus, this sign peculiar to Maria Konopnicka’s prose – *sympathy* – can be considered an ally of the evangelical message, present and in some sense disseminated in cultural texts. The evangelical message helps us to understand the meaning of the novelist’s artistic expressions, and Konopnicka’s novellas can be read as a gloss on the Gospel.

Conclusion

The first of the hypotheses put forward, according to which somatic sympathy, and consequently also a special kind of attentiveness to others, finds its full meaning and radiance when we include the work and person of Jesus of Nazareth in its interpretation, should be verified positively. For the selected Gospel pericopes confirm the profound meaning and significance of the symphysis of Jesus of Nazareth with other human beings, especially with the poor, those experiencing suffering and injustice, and with creation. This somatic sympathy, understood as symphysis with other human beings and with creation, takes its origin and finds its explanation in the mystery and event of Christ’s incarnation, and is completed in his public activity and in the central Paschal event.

Also, another hypothesis according to which the Gospel message is the source of attentiveness in Maria Konopnicka’s literary works should be verified positively. The analysis of her selected novellas proves that the writer deeply understood the message of the Gospel, creating literary works in which it is possible to identify the category of somatic sympathy as one of the basic features of composition and interpretation. She drew from the Gospel, which should be understood as a starting point in perceiving and understanding the world, which means that in Konopnicka’s work there are deeper references to the words and work of Jesus of Nazareth, rather than merely cultural ones limited to the superficial evocation

10 “Empathy entails more than feelings another’s pain; it is also the capacity to engage in an ‘extended altruism’ that ‘transcends’ the ties of family and tribal proximity. Ricard ... calls empathy the catalytic reaction that transforms altruistic love into compassion” (Lanzoni, 2018, p. 276). The author refers to the work: Ricard, 2015.

of biblical passages, figures and symbols. M. Konopnicka respected and even masterfully implemented the aesthetics of naturalism. However, this does not mean that she promoted secularization, considering it an advance in the history of mankind. Rather, from the perspective of *somathic sympathy*, she “inscribed” herself explicitly in the deepest message of the Gospel, which is reflected in her numerous literary texts.

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Beata K. Obsulewicz – historian of the literature of Positivism and Young Poland, head of Department Literature of Positivism and Young Poland in Faculty of Humanities, Catholic University of Lublin, head of the project Critical edition of all writings of B. Prus. Author of the dissertation *Sensibility. Writers of the period of Positivism on philanthropy and charity* (Lublin 2008) and other works devoted to Polish literature in the years 1863–1914. Research interests: artistic culture of the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, religious and ancient inspirations in culture, literature and social life. Also works for the Polish community and Poles outside the Republic of Poland.

Rafał Jakub Pastwa – journalist, media expert, editor-in-chief of *Gość Lubelski*, researcher and lecturer at the Institute of Journalism and Management at the Faculty of Social Sciences of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin. He is a member of the Polish Society of Social Communication; Bioethics Committee at the Regional Medical Chamber in Lublin; Interdisciplinary Team for Counteracting Domestic Violence; and the “Agape” Catholic Association for Aid to the Needy. Winner of the “Angelus lubelski” award in the field of media culture for 2016. He conducts research in the field of media science, focusing, inter alia, on the mediatization of religion, problems of modern journalism, the relationships between the media, culture, environmental protection and the phenomenon of communication. Involved in activities for the Polish community and Poles abroad.