

*Woman and old age in the light of 'Listy do Jerzego'  
[Letters to George] by Maria Kuncewiczowa*

*Kobieta i starość (na podstawie „Listów do Jerzego”  
Marii Kuncewiczowej)*

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Maria Kuncewiczowa, Jerzy Kuncewicz, *Letters to George*, old age in contemporary literature, prose memoir

**Słowa kluczowe**

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**Abstract**

The article concerns *Letters to George* – Maria Kuncewiczowa last literary work, written to commemorate her late husband. It is an excellent study of old age. On the cards *Letters* appears advanced in years, Maria Kuncewiczowa, alone because of her husband's death, struggling with the problems of old age. Tracing the image of senility, the writer seems to say that the most difficult experience in the autumn of life is death of a loved one. Old age – as evidenced by *Letters to George* – it's time of summarizing, reflect on life, it's time of thinking about eternity, finally time to grow up to the faith, to find God. Old age is marked by the disease, but the image of the end of life created by Kuncewiczowa, despite many constraints is optimistic.

**Abstrakt**

Artykuł traktuje o *Listach do Jerzego* – ostatniej książce Marii Kuncewiczowej, pisanej w celu upamiętnienia zmarłego męża. Utwór ten jest doskona-

łym studium starości. Na kartach *Listów* zjawia się posunięta w latach Maria Kuncewiczowa, osamotniona z powodu śmierci męża, na dodatek zmagająca się z problemami wieku starczego. Kreśląc obraz starości, pisarka zdaje się mówić, iż najtrudniejszym doświadczeniem w jesieni życia jest odejście najbliższej osoby. Starość – czego dowodzą *Listy do Jerzego* – to czas podsumowań, refleksji nad życiem, to czas rozmyślania o wieczności, wreszcie czas dorastania do wiary, odkrywania Boga. Starość naznaczona jest chorobami, ale obraz schyłku życia stworzony przez Kuncewiczową, mimo wielu ograniczeń, napawa optymizmem.

**Woman and old age in the light of ‘Listy do Jerzego’  
[Letters to George] by Maria Kuncewiczowa**

*Listy do Jerzego* [*Letters to George*] (1988) is the last literary work of Maria Kuncewiczowa. This book, published a year before Kuncewiczowa's death, was a goodbye to the readers of the first lady of Polish psychological prose. On the one hand, the work belongs to the group of books commemorating relatives, saving them from oblivion (which the writers did very often). On the other hand, it occupies an important place among cultural texts focusing on old age. Seeking literary connections for *Letters to George* in the first place one should point to the most popular poems of lamentations, the threnodies. The last book of Kuncewiczowa, an epitaph in honor of her late husband, corresponds to the *Laments* by Jan Kochanowski, a series of poems entitled *Anka* by Broniewski (commemorating Joanna Kozicka, the only daughter of the poet who died tragically), and finally to the “beggarly lamentations”<sup>1</sup> by Tadeusz Różewicz (*Mother Departs*). The volume is dedicated to Stefania Różewiczowa who, interestingly, is also one of its lyrical subjects. It is crowned with beautiful and touching words, worth quoting: “To, co w naszym domu było najdroższe i najpiękniejsze, to Mama”<sup>2</sup> [What was most precious and most beautiful in our home was our mother]. In Polish literature, there are many works dealing with the parting with one's mother. For example, a literary farewell of Karol Wojtyła to his prematurely deceased mother. It is one of the few songs dedicated to Emilia Kaczorowska Wojtyła: „Nad Twoją białą mogiłą/ białe kwitną życia kwiaty – / o, ileż lat to już było/ bez Ciebie – duchu skrzydlaty – / Nad Twoją białą mogiłą/ od tylu lat zamkniętą,/ spokój krąży z dziwną siłą,/ z siłą, jak śmierć – niepojętą./ Nad Twoją białą mogiłą/ cisza jasna promienieje,/ jakby w górę wznosiło,/ jakby krzepiło nadzieję./ Nad Twoją białą mogiłą/ klękałem ze swoim smutkiem – / o, jak to dawno już było – / jak się dziś zdaje malutkiem./ Nad Twoją białą mogiłą,/ o Matko – zgasłe kochanie – /me usta szeptały bezsiłą;/ – Daj wieczne odpoczywanie”<sup>3</sup> [Over this your white grave – the flowers of life in white – so many years without you – how many have passed out of sight? / Over this your white grave – covered for years, there is a stir – in the air, something uplifting – and, like death, beyond comprehension./ Over this your white grave – oh, mother, can

<sup>1</sup> T. Różewicz, *Matka odchodzi*, Wrocław 1999, p. 9

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem, p. 135

<sup>3</sup> K. Wojtyła, *Poezja, dramaty, szkice. Tryptyk rzymski*, Kraków 2004, p. 27.

such loving cease? – for all his filial adoration – a prayer: – Give her eternal peace–].

A biographical story of Katarzyna Nowak entitled *Moja mama czarownica* is a farewell to the author's mother, Dorota Terakowska. As can be seen, using threnodies, lyrical verses and memoirs writers usually say goodbye to their loved ones, family or, less often, friends and acquaintances. At this point we should recall one of the last works of Wojciech Żukrowski *Za kurtyną mroku. Zabawa w chowanego*, published in 1995, or more precisely the second part of the said collection of short epic forms *Zabawa w chowanego*, consisting of seven sketches in which the author of *Z kraju milczenia* bids farewell to fellow writers: Wilhelm Szewczyk, a forgotten bard of the Silesia region (according to Żukrowski as prominent as Gustaw Morcinek), Zofia Kossak-Szczucka, Pola Gojawiczyńska, Halina Krahelska, Adolf Rudnicki, Jan Dobraczynski, a writer who went blind at the end of his life, Anna Akhmatova, described by Żukrowski as the writer "stifled [...] by conspiracy of silence"<sup>4</sup>, and finally Stefan Kisielewski and Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. A sketch entitled *Nieprzekupne zwierciadło* about Jerzy Duda-Grac is unique in that it was the only work about a living person. Elżbieta Filipek wrote about this interesting volume of Żukrowski as follows: "[...] Żukrowski recalls [...] those who are forgotten, abandoned and thrown out of "our world"... or put away. Why? Is this because they were themselves and they remained loyal to the local, national or cultural traditions? Is it because they thought that they needed to act, to change the world, even if it required concessions to the realities which were not necessarily ideal? Or vice versa – because they decided to be themselves against the surrounding world?"<sup>5</sup>. A volume by Kazimierz Wyka entitled *Odeszli*, a much earlier work than *Za kurtyną mroku* by Żukrowski, is of similar nature. Here the author mentions great figures of Polish literature and the history of literature, including Stefan Kołaczkowski, Karol Ludwik Koniński, Juliusz Kleiner, Kazimierz Nitsch, Tadeusz Mikulski, Stanisław Pigoń, Wacław Borowy, Maria Dąbrowska, Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska, Wilhelm Mach and Adam Polewka. It is worth noting that the work was being written for a long time, constantly improved and corrected. It seems, therefore, that it was a matter of great importance for the author. Wyka thanks the deceased for all the good he experienced from them, however, he is not just a mere false flatterer glorifying them.

History shows that it is possible to commemorate a deceased person also by means of a building. The most famous Indian mausoleum, erected in the seventeenth century, situated on the river Yamuna, is a monument of love of

<sup>4</sup> W. Żukrowski, *Za kurtyną mroku. Zabawa w chowanego*, Warszawa 1995, p. 209.

<sup>5</sup> E. Filipek, *Minione czy zapowiedź jutra*, „Nowe Książki” 1996, no. 4, p. 37.

a husband for his wife. The building, crowned with a characteristic dome and consisting of a huge gate and four minarets, is a must for anyone on a trip to India. Taj Mahal was built by Emperor Shah Jahan in honor of his deceased wife. The young empress died shortly after the birth their fourteenth child. Their marriage lasted for 18 years and the construction of the mausoleum took 22 years. Shah Jahan, who deeply loved his wife, announced a two-year national mourning and forbade the people wearing jewelry or using perfume. After his death, the emperor came to rest next to his beloved wife in the mausoleum and the legend of their beautiful love continues until today.

*Letters to George*, a very personal book written by Kuncewiczowa who at that time was quite old, occupies an important place among cultural works dealing with old age, or using a more euphemistic language, with the autumn of life. The many faces of old age can be found in art, for example in Van Gogh's *Old Man In Sorrow* also known as *On The Threshold Of Eternity* (1889), paintings by Piotr Michałowski entitled *Starzec siedzący na schodach*, *Studium starca na tle urwiska* [Old Man Sitting on the Stairs – a study of an old man against a cliff] (both dating back to the period from 1837 to 1840), a beautiful combination of youth and old age by Domenico Ghirlandajo (*Old Man With A Boy*), and finally portraits by Rembrandt – *Portrait Of The Father* (1630), *Portrait Of An Old Man In Red* (1652-1654), *Portrait Of An Eighty Three Year Old Woman* (1634). In literature, in turn, the faces of the old age are presented in numerous works including: *The Old Man and The Sea* by Ernest Hemingway, *Cudzoziemka* by Maria Kuncewiczowa, *Oscar and the Lady in Pink* by Eric Emmanuel Schmitt, or *O starych kobietach* by Czesław Miłosz. Jacek Kaczmarski frequently sang about old women (*Stary Michał Anioł i Pieta Rondanini*, *Starość Tezeusza*, *Starość Piotra Wysockiego*, *Starość Owidiusza*, *Starzy ludzie w autobusie*). The master of Renaissance art depicted by Kaczmarski, feeling physical impotence and impending death, seems to depreciate his art asking about its value and durability: “Po co lepiłem lalki skoro/ W ziemię zamieniam się?”<sup>6</sup> [Why was I sculpting dolls/ if now I am turning into dust?]. Old Theseus also summarizes his life, recalls his former glory and today's insignificance saying: “Kiedyś walczyłem z potworami – / Dziś przeistaczam się w potwora./ Na ścianach cień mój, niby pamięć/ Tego, kim byłem ledwie wczoraj”<sup>7</sup> [Once I was fighting with monsters -/now I am becoming one./ My shadow on the walls like a memory/ Of what I was yesterday]. Old people on a bus, according to the title of a song by Kaczmarski, are senile, physically distorted and at the same sometimes misunder-

<sup>6</sup> J. Kaczmarski, *Stary Michał Anioł i Pieta Rondanini*, [ in:] *Antologia poezji*, Warszawa 2012, p. 752.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p 1107.

stood by others. In general, old age depicted in literature refers to experience and wisdom of life (e.g. Hemingway's Santiago, the Lady in Pink supporting the dying Oscar in the book by Schmitt), to the time of looking back in life trying to summarize it (e.g. Rose called a foreigner by Kuncewiczowa or the old Michelangelo from the song by Kaczmarski) and finally to the struggle with physical weakness.

The work of Kuncewiczowa is suffused with woman's experiences. There is meditation on motherhood (*Przymierze z dzieckiem*), love, especially the unfulfilled one yielding suffering, (*Miłość panińska, Cudzoziemka, Tristan 1946*), and old age (*Cudzoziemka, Listy do Jerzego*). The last work is a story about an elderly woman. It is a collection of 23 letters of Kuncewiczowa to her late husband, crowned with a postscript. The author expresses her loneliness, pain and inner split resulting from the loss of the loved one. The book was being written for four years. As we read in the first letter, Kuncewiczowa began working on it seven months after the death of her husband, Jerzy. Kuncewiczowa resembles her heroine, Alla Dzijan<sup>8</sup>, who was created when life was still normal for the author. Creating Alla Dzijan she only sensed that "[...]że zbliża się coś, na co nie znajdzie słów. Rzeczywistość wieloznaczna, całkowicie nierzeczywista"<sup>9</sup> [There is something unspeakable coming. Ambiguous reality, completely unreal]. *Letters to George* has a 'brace' composition with a special dedication posted in the last book of Kuncewiczowa's husband playing the role of the brace: "Marysiu, nie mogłem zaznać większej łaski Bożej... niż jest nasz związek... O utrzymanie go w każdej formie bytu proszę Ojca Naszego" [Mary, I could not experience the greater grace of God ... than our relationship ... I will ask Our Father to keep it in any form of existence] (pp. 31 and 114). These words resound at the beginning of the book and just before its ending and even more they constitute the entire work's keynote. Another brace in *Letters to George* is a recollection of their son, Witold Kuncewicz, who wanted to help his mother cross a busy Warsaw's street.

<sup>8</sup> A. Klecka writes about the figure of Kuncewiczowa in an interesting way: „[...] The figue of Alla [...] was to be a double of the writer and at the same time a mask put on in front of the world. She was supposed to be a fragment of primary physical entity, some kind of an outfit in which the writer felt less afraid of the reality and which guaranteed the real experience of reality. The figure of Alla, thanks to her ability of transformation and integration of various forms of existence, offer the author a new sponge-like and chameleon-like identity” – [in] Klecka, *Problem autorskiej tożsamości w powojennym pisarstwie Marii Kuncewiczowej. Perspektywa genderowa*, „Ruch Literacki” 2005, volumes 4-5, pp. 437-452.

<sup>9</sup> M. Kuncewiczowa, *Listy do Jerzego*, Warszawa 1988, p. 7 (other quotations from *Listy do Jerzego* are referred to in the main body of the paper with page numbers in parenthesis).

He said then: “Nie bój się, mamusiu, ja ciebie przeprowadzę” [Do not worry, mother, I will help you cross the street] (pp. 6 and 111). Kuncewiczowa fondly recalls the scene. Lech Ludorowski in a laudation<sup>10</sup> appreciated the content and formal qualities of the *Letters to George*. He stressed that the book is “deeply acquiring”, “unusual in pronunciation and formal reasons” “touching,” “wonderful”<sup>11</sup>. The aging Maria Kuncewiczowa comes to the fore in *Letters to George*. She feels alone after the death of her husband and struggles with the problems of old age. Generally, the book presents a woman’s view of old age. Reading *Letters to George* we understand that the most difficult and the most important experience for Kuncewiczowa in her old age is the death of her husband. The writer is trying to deal with this problem, however, it is very difficult for her. Maria Dąbrowska in her second great novel entitled *Przygody człowieka myślącego* wrote these important words: „Śmierć bliskich to rozpostarcie się pustki, w której trwa jakiś czas żywe wspomnienie zmarłych, kiedy to się zmienia, a zmienia się nieuchronnie, wtedy zmarły umiera ostatecznie, śmierć zabiera go zewsząd, gdzie go nasza wyobraźnia i nasza tęsknota umieściły. A w pustkę nadchodzi nowe życie już z tamtym cierpieniem nic niemające wspólne”<sup>12</sup> [The death of the loved ones is like a stretch of emptiness, where for some time there is a living memory of the deceased, when it changes, and it changes inevitably the deceased dies eventually, death takes him away to a place where our imagination and our longing put him. And the emptiness is filled with a new life that has nothing to do with that that suffering]. In *Letters to George*, contrary to what Dąbrowska writes, Jerzy does not die for ever and, what is important, the elapsed time (*Letters* were created over the period of four years) changes nothing in this regard. Maria addresses the recipient of the correspondence as a living person and seems to remove from the memory the death of her beloved husband. The author tries to overcome death and she wants to extend the life of Jerzy Kuncewicz<sup>13</sup>. This feature of *Letters to George* was noticed by its early reviewers, Tadeusz Swat and Piotr Szewc. Swat (presenting a little exaggerated thesis that it was probably the best work of Kuncewiczowa) said: “Są Listy zapisem bólu i rozpaczy po stracie męża, ale nie trenem, nie opłakiwaniem i niezgodą na los, ale też nie buntem, są czymś więcej i czymś dalej – próbą zaprzeczenia

<sup>10</sup> In 1989 Kuncewiczowa was awarded the title of honoris causa doctorate of the Maria Skłodowska-Curie University in Lublin.

<sup>11</sup> L. Ludorowski *Laudacja promotora*, [in:] *O twórczości Marii Kuncewiczowej*, ed. L. Ludorowskiego, Lublin 1997, p. 25.

<sup>12</sup> M. Dąbrowska, *Przygody człowieka myślącego*, Warszawa 1987, p.273.

<sup>13</sup> A different opinion is voiced by B. Kazimierczyk (see. B. Kazimierczyk, *Pejzaż naszego świata. Wokół „Listów do Jerzego”*, „Odrodzenie” 1989, no. 21, p. 2).

śmierci, ocalenia Jerzego przez miłość, pamięć i literaturę”<sup>14</sup> [The *Letters* are a record of pain and despair over the loss of her husband, but not a lament or mourning or disagreement with the destiny, not a rebellion, they are something more and something further – attempting a denial of death, salvation through love, memory and literature]. Piotr Szewc, in turn, states that while reading the letters we constantly feel “the presence of the writer’s husband”<sup>15</sup>. He then adds: „Kuncewiczowa zwierza się zmarłemu mężowi, czym jest jej okaleczone, niepowrotnie podzielone życie. I w tym intymnym obcowaniu ciągle są bardzo blisko”<sup>16</sup> [Kuncewiczowa describes to her deceased husband what her mutilated and irretrievably broken life is. And in this intimate communion they are still very close]. The above opinion is shared by Jan Tomkowski who speaks of the constant presence of Jerzy Kuncewicz, the recipient of *Letters* <sup>17</sup>.

Alicja Szałagan, who worked on a collection of letters of Maria and Jerzy Kuncewiczowie, points out that the letters from the years 1944–1958, which is the period when the Kuncewiczowie quite often remained in separation (later they would not part for long periods of time), testify to “the great commitment of the spouses and their friendly relations”<sup>18</sup>. Here is one of the letters testifying to a special relationship between Kuncewiczowa and her husband: “Dziękuję ci za to, co napisałeś z głębi serca, i uważam to sobie za największy triumf życiowy. Książki to tylko jeden aspekt natury pisarza, zawsze są one wyrazem pewnej kokieterii psychicznej, są wyborem z życia, śmietanką uczuć i myśli, więc łatwiej jest ludzi przywiązywać do siebie książkami niż własną osobą, własnym życiem. Zwłaszcza, że nasze wspólne życie pozbawione było pasji. Nie było między nami ani miłosego czadu, ani nałogu wspólnej sypialni, więc rzeczywiście coś istotnego, coś trwalszego niż erotyzm musiało wejść między nas i tak nas z sobą związać. Że Ty tak sobie cenisz to coś, że nie masz do mnie żalu za wszelkie braki naszego współżycia (które są wynikiem winy obustronnej), uważam za wielką łaskę, doprawdy niezasłużoną”<sup>19</sup> [Thank you for what you wrote from the depth of your heart, and I think it is the greatest triumph in life. Books are only one aspect of the nature of the writer, they are always an expression of some kind of

<sup>14</sup> T. Swat, „Listy do Jerzego” *Marii Kuncewiczowej*, „Kierunki” 1988, no. 47, p. 13.

<sup>15</sup> P. Szewc, *Wyznania szeptem*, „Tygodnik Powszechny” 1989, no. 5, p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>17</sup> J. Tomkowski, *Nieobecność Marii Kuncewiczowej*, „Przegląd Katolicki” 1989, nos. 33/34, p.10.

<sup>18</sup> A. Szałagan, „Ciężar obecności”. *Dopełnienia autobiograficznych wątków twórczości Marii Kuncewiczowej w listach do męża (1944–1958)*, „Pamiętnik Literacki” 2006, volume 4, p. 97.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem.



mental coquetry; they are a choice of life, cream of feelings and thoughts, so it is easier to attach people to each other with books than with one's own person, one's own life. Especially because our life together was devoid of passion. There was no love between us, no addiction of common bedroom, therefore something more significant, something more enduring than eroticism came between us to tie us together]. It is worth quoting at least a few very sensitive words of Maria to her husband from one of their letters: "George, my dear, very dear [...] My dear, dearest George", "I am ashamed to admit it but I really miss you"<sup>20</sup>.

A world without Jerzy is very difficult for Maria. The writer, of whom Helena Zaworska said that she needed "constant contact with other people," as she was "open to other people"<sup>21</sup> needs the presence of Jerzy and thus she is trying to bring him back to life. For aging Maria Kuncewiczowa Jerzy's death becomes a trauma with which she could not be reconciled. Her suffering is stifled with the belief that Jerzy is still alive, that, as we read in the analyzed work, his "czaszka [...] jest ciągle pełna myśli!" [skull is still full of thoughts] (p. 38). The writer often addresses her late husband as someone still alive: "Chcę zapytać: Czy pamiętasz? Ale może pamięć rozkłada się i wsiąka w ziemię, jak wątroba, jak mięśnie... [...] Czy pamiętasz ten dzień na początku marca w Rzymie w roku 1984, kiedy siedziałeś w naszym pokoju u sióstr franciszkanek z Libanu" [I want to ask you: Do you remember? But perhaps the memory is falling apart and soaking into the ground, as the liver, or muscles ... [...] Do you remember that day in early March in Rome in 1984 when you were sitting in our room at the Franciscan Sisters from Lebanon] (p. 13). And one more piece of *Letters to George* where Kuncewiczowa seems to forget about the death of her beloved husband or rather tries to overcome it. Maria, looking at images of her husband hanging on the walls of their house in Kazimierz, one photograph and two portraits (one painted by Antoni Michalak, the other by Władysław Filipiak), confides: "Stojąc tam przed tobą, mówię co rano: «Jestem. I ty jesteś. Dziękuję za nasze długie i piękne życie i modłę się, żeby ono trwało». Ty się uśmiechasz. Czasem prawie szczęśliwy, czasem smutny, często jakby zmęczony tym trwaniem bez końca" [Standing there, in front of you, every morning I say: Here I am. And you are here, too. I thank you for our long and beautiful life and I pray that it will last forever] (p. 63). Maria enters into a dialogue with the Jerzy's portraits, she reads to him the current correspondence or poems which he once wrote.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, p. 98.

<sup>21</sup> H. Zaworska, *Wczoraj i dzisiaj*, Poznań 1992, p. 118.

Marian Kisiel rightly concludes that the writing of the author of *Cudzoziemka* is fraught with the presence of “[...] absent people, events and places”<sup>22</sup>. Kuncewiczowa “brings dead people back to life for a certain period”<sup>23</sup>. The wife-writer talks about her everyday life with her husband who is absent among the living yet still present in the *Letters* (to use the reference of Kisiel). She talks about present events (for example a visit of Erika, fitting crosses at a cemetery in Kazimierz, a coronation of the painting of Our Lady of Kazimierz or the death of Renia Lorentowiczówna). She recalls the past (the birth of her son Witold, the death of her mother, father and brother Aleksander, the funeral of Jerzy, a common stay in Rome or the last New year’s Eve spent together). The constant presence of Jerzy Kuncewicz, absent in real life, is an expression of her immense longing and the love she felt for her life companion as well as the suffering associated with the parting with the beloved man. In the eighth letter she tells us that her thoughts are like autumn leaves “[...]gonią się, uciekają, chcą się oderwać [od Jerzego, A.W.], nie mogą” [running away trying to leave George, unsuccessfully] (p. 42). The twelfth letter also contains an important confession: “[...] nie zerwała się więź między żywą a umarłym” [the bond between the living and the dead is not broken] (p. 63). In *Letters to George* Kuncewiczowa stresses several times that she and her husband became totally themselves, they walked through their life together and their relationship was unbreakable. Two merging crosses on the Jerzy’s grave (one with the engraved dates of her husband’s birth and death and the other with “[...] pustym miejscem na śmierć, z napisem: Pisarka” [an empty space for death with the word: Writer] (p. 71) as well as a willow of which Kuncewiczowa would say that “„[...] żyła naszym życiem. Miała nie jeden pień, tylko dwa pnie. Tak, jak my żyła w dwóch postaciach” [it would live our life. It didn’t have one trunk but two. Just like us it lived in two forms] (p. 47) became for the writer visible signs of her unity with Jerzy. In the thirteenth letter Kuncewiczowa finds with pain that the willow “[...] utraciła jeden pień i stała się kaleka” [lost one bark and became crippled] (p. 68).

Treating *Letters* as a story about an aging woman it must be emphasized that old age stimulates reflection on life – it is a time to draw conclusions. Kuncewiczowa goes back to all the important events that contributed to her life. Delving into the past, she recalls the death of her mother, her father and her brother Aleksander, her wedding with Jerzy, the birth of their only son Witold, building a house in 1936 and the outbreak of the war. She speaks

<sup>22</sup> M. Kisiel, „Z gapiostwa, z ekstazy i z niebycia”. *O niektórych aspektach światopoglądu Marii Kuncewiczowej*, [in:] *W stronę Kuncewiczowej... Studia i szkice*, ed. W. Wójcik, Katowice 1988, p. 22.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem.

about the death of her mother in a very poetic way<sup>24</sup>: “Straciwszy matkę, uniesioną przez Brahmsa do nieba muzyki, pełnego smyczków, strun, klawiszy i głosów, wróciłam do domu płakać “[Losing my mother, taken away by Brahms to the heaven of music, full of bows, strings, keys and voices, I returned home to cry] (p. 23). Going back in time makes Kuncewiczowa critical of herself in the past. She sees the mistakes of the past and criticizes her lack of sensitivity to her husband. Now, years later it seems to her that she did not love him the way he deserved it. She emphasizes that Jerzy was “bardzo niezwykłym [...] człowiekiem” [a very unusual man] (p. 31). She feels guilty that perhaps she did not show her love to Jerzy as she should have. She recalls her behavior over the bed of dying Jerzy, “Szeptалам чуле wyrazy z żarliwością, jakiej skąpiłam, kiedy byłam młoda. Teraz omdlewałam z żalu: dlaczego? Dlaczego szczeniłam tak długo tej mowy erotycznej, jedynej prawdy serca? Zaklinałam ciebie: Usłysz! Słuchaj, jak ja ciebie kocham, jak pragnę, jak dziękuję! [...] Otóż i prawda ostateczna: na rzecz najważniejszą zawsze czasu zabraknie” [I was whispering tender words with fervor which was scarce when I was young. Now I am fainting with grief: why? Why for so long I savoided the erotic speech, the only truth of the heart? Hear! Listen, I love you, I want to thank you! [...] Well the ultimate truth is: there is always no time for the most important thing] (p. 10). Examining her life the author does not hide her disappointment. She stresses that she imagined the end of her life in a completely different way. She dreamed of an extended family, a close relationship with her son and daughter-in-law and a home full of grandchildren. Meanwhile, she experienced the breakdown of her son’s marriage and in letter number nine she complains: “Wnuki? Jeden jedyny wnuk, ogromny, brodaty, łagodny i obcy” [Grandchildren? One grandson, big, gentle and alien] (p. 45).

*Letters to George*, Kuncewiczowa’s study of the woman in old age, make it clear that in the ‘autumn of life’ we more often contemplate the inevitability of death and the eternity. Widowed Maria Kuncewiczowa often speaks about moving to the other side of life: “Jerzy, lokatorze nieskończoności! Będę twoją sublokatorką niesforną” [Jerzy, a tenant of eternity! I will be your riotous tenant] (p. 122). The writer humbly accepts the inevitability of death and the impermanence of life. In the closing sentence of *Letters* she creates an image of a stork and its partner preparing the nest “dla nowych właścicieli ziemi i powietrza” [for the new owners of land and air] (p. 122). Bronisław Mamoń, acknowledging the constant presence of death on the pages of the literary correspondence between Maria and Jerzy (the death of Jerzy, the

<sup>24</sup> A. Kochańczyk (*Kazimierz Marii Kuncewiczowej*, „Akcent” 1997, no. 4, p. 30) calls *Listy do Jerzego* „the most exquisite poetic prose”.

writer's parents, her brother and her friend Renia Lorentowiczówna), insists that the work is marked by the "stigma of dying"<sup>25</sup>. To reiterate, therefore, death, or the prospect of departure, the end of life is an important element of the final book of Kuncewiczowa. The writer is interested in the afterlife. In one of her first letters she asks her husband: "Jerzy, jak mam sobie wyobrazić tę przestrzeń czy ten żywioł, czy ten byt, gdzie ty teraz jesteś" [Jerzy, how can I imagine the space or this element in which you live now] (p. 9). A little further she speculates on life in the hereafter: „Zima jest sroga i boję się myśleć, czy zachowałeś czucie na chłód. Czy stamtąd, gdzie jesteś, zauważa się mroźne mgły, które w nocy tak szczelnie otulają brzozy, że słońce zastaje ich pnie i gałęzie zamienione w solidne srebro, bez jednej szczeliny na oddech?” [Winter is harsh and I am afraid to wonder whether you still feel the cold. Can you see frosty mists which at night so tightly surround birches, the sun finds their trunks and branches turned in solid silver, without a single slot for a breath?] (p. 46). The author is convinced that her late husband is alive but in a new reality. She states that most probably he learned "wszystkie smaki" [all flavours] (p. 33). Later she asks him if now he understands St. Therese of the Child Jesus, the great mystic of the Church (p. 35). At other times she is preoccupied with yet another problem: "Czy teraz śpiewasz [Jerzy, A.W.]? Pamiętam, jak się śmiałeś z chórów anielskich, wyobrażałeś je sobie jako kakofonię, z góry odmawiałeś udziału. Pewnie nadal odmawiasz, bo ciebie nie słyszę" [Do you still sing? I remember you laughing at angels choirs and you imagined them as certain cacophony in which you did not want to participate. Most probably you still refuse to join them because I cannot hear you] (p. 40). She is trying to imagine this new world of Jerzy and asks the next question: "Czy teraz wszedłeś na Golgotę? Sam? Beze mnie? Czy te miliony pątników weszły razem z tobą? Czy też na Golgotę trzeba wejść samotnie?" [Have you reached the Golgotha? Alone? Without me? Are those millions of pilgrims with you there?] (p. 16).

Kuncewiczowa, portraying herself in old age, shows that the decline of life is the time of growing faith, the time of spiritual maturation. The writer, who wasn't previously a devout Catholic, approaching the end of her life begins to analyze the prayers of Our Father and Hail Mary. She states with conviction that these prayers are "ponad miarę człowieka" [beyond the capacity of man] (p. 50). She recalls a meeting with John Paul II and his assurance that the Lord's Prayer is a "[...] difficult to prayer" (p. 49). Immediately she adds: „Tej trudnej modlitwy trzymam się teraz jak tonący deski zbawienia. Stara kobieta, zmierzająca do dziewięćdziesiątki, z twarzą namaszczonej kosmetykami, z goryczą ostatniego dzieciennego lekarstwa w ustach, z bólem

<sup>25</sup> B. Mamoń, *Maria Kuncewiczowa nie żyje*, „Tygodnik Powszechny” 1989, no. 31, p. 6.

w kościach, składam ręce i przez zaciśnięte zęby mówię głośno: «Ojciec nasz, któryś jest w niebie» [I stick to this difficult prayer like to salvation. An old woman, reaching the age of ninety, with her face covered with creams, with the bitterness of her last medicine in her mouth, with pain in her bones, I put my arms together and through clenched teeth I say: Our Father who art in Heaven] (p. 49). The writer asks the Mother of the Savior to grant her late husband not the eternal rest (because he was a man of work), but the “eternal life” (p. 51). Kuncewiczowa writes a beautiful prayer: “Przeczysta Patronko grzesznej pisarki Marii, spraw za przyczyną swego Boskiego Syna, żeby mój mąż nie smucił się, nie tęsknił, nie odwracał się w stronę naszego świata, żeby uszczęśliwiła go podróż w Nieskończoność” [The Immaculate Patroness of the sinful writer Maria, I beg you with the help of your divine Son, spare my husband any grief and longing, so as he does not turn to our world but is pleased with the journey to Infinity] (p. 51). Aging Kuncewiczowa on “przededniu ostatniego namaszczenia” [on the day before the last rites] (p. 33) writes the following confession: „[...] W Hostii nie czuję smaku ciała i krwi, czuje nakaz: «Spożywaj! To ja, w Trójcy Świętej Jedyny. Spożywaj Mnie! Spożywaj Boga, który jest w niebie i na każdym miejscu, więc powinien być w tobie. Spożywaj Boga!» Odchodzę od ołtarza i podczas gdy Hostia rozplywa się w ustach, czekam na cud „ [In the Host I do not feel the taste of flesh and blood, I feel the order: «Eat! It’s me, the Only One in the Holy Trinity. Eat Me! Eat God who is in heaven and in every place, so He should be in you. Eat God!»; I go away from the altar and while the Host melts in the mouth I am waiting for a miracle] (p. 32). Kuncewiczowa is open about the fact that her growing faith started late, only ten years ago, when she was approaching the age of eighty. Only then, as she said with incredible candor “objawiła mi się «tajemnica wiary»” [did the mystery of faith was revealed to me] (p. 31).

Another striking fact is old Kuncewiczowa, busy with matters of faith, reflecting on the image of Our Lady of Kazimierz. This reflection is transformed into an original ekphrasis. The writer, telling her deceased husband about the coronation of the painting of the Virgin Mary, at the same time makes its literary description. She states that the painting from a Kazimierz church showing the moment of the Annunciation, depicts two intertwined elements – the earthly and the heavenly, the divine and the human. The following is an excerpt of the ekphrasis: „Scena dzieje się na pograniczu dwu światów: Maryja to mieszkanka Ziemi, u Jej stóp stoi koszyk z robótką kobiecą, na oparciu kłęcznika leży otwarta księga modłów. A więc wysłannik ze skrzydłami wielkiego ptaka, obywatel żywiołu niezemskiego, kłęczy tu przed Ziemianką. Oznajmia Jej wolę Stworzyciela «wszystkich rzeczy widzialnych i niewidzialnych», że oto Ona, zapłodniona przez Ducha Świętego, urodzi

Boga-Człowieka. Zwiastun trzyma w ręku kwiat nazaretańskiego ogrodu, ale jego obecność rzuca w ciemne powietrze Nazaretu wielki snop jasności, w której się pławi nieziemski Duch w postaci gołębia [...]” [The scene takes place in between the two worlds: Mary is a resident of the Earth, at her feet there is a basket with some needlework and on the kneeler there is an open book of prayers. So the envoy with the wings of a great bird, a citizen of an otherworldly element is kneeling here before the Woman. The Angel declares the will of the Creator of «all things visible and invisible»; that She, conceived by the Holy Spirit will give birth to the God-Man. The Angel is holding a flower from a Nazareth garden, but his presence casts a big sheaf of brightness into the dark air Nazareth, in which the unearthly Spirit in the form of a dove is present] (p. 105-106).

After reading *Letters* the main observation is that old age for a woman is also a time of struggling with physical weaknesses and diseases of old age. The writer mentions three stays at hospitals but at the same time she distances herself from her own impotence and says jokingly: “Wróciłam znowu ze szpitala. Już trzecia reanimacja, a wiadomo, że «do trzech razy sztuka». Trzeba się streszczać” [I have just come back from hospital. It has been the third reanimation and as people say «third time lucky» so I need to hurry up] (p. 113).

Zaworska rightly says that *Letters to George* show how “to be great in old age”<sup>26</sup>. Indeed, the first lady of the Polish psychological prose stands before the eyes of the reader experiencing aging with dignity. Despite the limitations of age or various diseases she tries to lead a normal life. She indulges in creative work, cultivates a backyard garden, meets with friends, takes part in the Music Festival in Łańcut, “talks” with her husband, or to be more precise, conducts with her deceased husband a very personal exchange of ideas, which is reflected in *Letters to George*. She is accompanied by the belief that she will leave something indestructible behind: “Zostanie coś, co miało być przyczyną i usprawiedliwieniem mojego istnienia: pisarstwo” [I will leave something that was supposed to be the cause of and justification for my existence. I will leave behind my writing](p. 93).

Anna Węgrzyniakowa stresses that Kuncewiczowa “always writes about herself”<sup>27</sup>. *Letters to George* testify to the correctness of this thesis. The last book of Kuncewiczowa presents a portrait of an aging writer, or more generally, the image of a woman in old age. What is the portrait of aging women (and herself) presented by Kuncewiczowa? In the autumn of her life the writer

<sup>26</sup> H. Zaworska, *Posłowie*, [in:] M. Kuncewiczowa, *Listy do Jerzego*, Warszawa 1988, p. 139.

<sup>27</sup> A. Węgrzyniakowa, *Kobieta-Fantom, czyli prawda Kuncewiczowej o kobiecie*, [in:] *W stronę Kuncewiczowej... Studia i szkice*, ed. W. Wójcik, Katowice 1988, p. 32.

primarily struggled with inconsolable grief over the loss of her husband. To ease her pain, she seemed to contradict his departure, she tried to overcome death, to bring Jerzy to life, give him immortality through literature. *Letters to George* shows that the decline of life is for women filled with a great loneliness (resulting from losing relatives, friends or acquaintances). It is the time of evaluating the past, of growing faith and the struggle with physical weakness. It is worth recalling the image of old women from the poem by Czesław Miłosz: „Zgięte artretycznie, w czerni, na nogach-patykach,/ Posuwają się o lasce przed ołtarz, tam gdzie Pantokrator,/ W zorzy złoconych promieni podnosi dwa palce. [...] / Matki nasze, którym nie odpłaciliśmy nigdy, Zajęci żeglowaniem, wędrówką przez kontynenty”<sup>28</sup> [Bent arthritic, in black, on his legs-sticks, / moving with a grace in front of the altar, where Christ Pantocrator, / In dawn of golden rays raises two fingers. [...] / Our mothers, which we had never repayed, because of sailing, journey across continents].

The images of women created by Miłosz and Kuncewiczowa are consistent and have common features (loneliness in the autumn of life, physical disability, return to religion, or growth in devotion) but at the same time they are built with other means, hence the overall effect is different. In the case of Kuncewiczowa we receive a mild, warm image of old age, after all optimistic, whereas Miłosz’s description is full of sadness and is depressing.

<sup>28</sup> Cz. Miłosz, *Stare kobiety*, [in:] *Kroniki*, Kraków 1988, p. 21.