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Stabat Mater: The Impossible Mourning in Teresa Ferenc's Poetry

*Every God, including the God of the Word, relies on
a mother Goddess.*

(Kristeva 1987: 252)

One of the motifs haunting Teresa Ferenc's poetic works is the figure of the Mother of Sorrows, which, according to Julia Kristeva and Jacques Derrida, becomes a symbol of "impossible" mourning. In my interpretation, this mourning is connected not only with the poet's private experiences,¹ but also with the wide-ranging political and ethical project that characterized the transnational anti-war and anti-military feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s in Western countries, countries of the former Eastern Bloc, as well as in countries undergoing the process of decolonization. These movements not only addressed the cruelty of waging war on the civilian population, but also exposed the political economy of this phenomenon. War in its most brutal form is an attack on the conditions of reproduction of life, which is why it is one of the most perverted practices of patriarchal-colonial capitalism. It is, therefore, no coincidence that the anti-war protests made use of the maternal figure. This figure was meant to symbolize the reproductive powers of women as a counterbalance to a system that, as Tithi Bhattacharya (2020) claimed, produces death.

1 Teresa Ferenc's poetry is informed by her childhood experiences, specifically with the pacification of Sochy in Zamość County. On June 1, 1943, the nine-year-old Ferenc bore witness to the death of her parents and other residents of the village.

This text addresses the way in which the poetic description of post-war trauma is related to the anti-war feminist policy that emerged as a result of the socio-political changes during the 1960s and 1970s in the People's Republic of Poland, an era officially considered non-feminist. This policy was defined primarily by a battle in the area of social reproduction, where the stakes included improvements in the conditions of social life in the individual, collective and intergenerational dimensions. This period coincided with the explosion of women's writing, which is closely related to the description of war traumas (such as the works of Halina Poświatowska, Anna Świrszczyńska, Ludmiła Marjańska, Anna Kamińska, Joanna Pollakówna, and Teresa Ferenc). Therefore, it can be argued that writing trauma somehow forces poets to invent a new language, one that is saturated with bodily matter, which in effect leads to the reinvention not only of the traditional concept of sexual difference, but also of the entire social order based on the devaluation of women's reproductive labour.

This shift is visible in Ferenc's work. Although it has so far been read in autobiographical terms and regarded as religious poetry,² her work contains the germinating seeds of a new feminist policy of the 1960s and 1970s based on the imperative of radical solidarity with the weakest members of society. In three volumes of poetry—*Wypalona Dolina* (Burnt Valley) (1979), *Pieta* (1981) and *Grzeszny Pacierz* (Sinful Prayer) (1983)—maternal grieving, referring to two motifs, *Stabat Mater* and *pieta*, gains a new quality: removed from the narrowly understood family relations and the religious context, it becomes a capacious metaphor, encompassing the entire world of lost social ties. The poet wants to do justice not only to her parents, the inhabitants of Sochy or the war heroes revered in the political and military discourse; rather she wants to acknowledge the silent and unremembered death of civilians—children, women, elderly people—of whom there is no trace in the collective memory.

1. The suffering mother

In the poem titled *Matka Dolorosa* (Mother Dolorosa) we are dealing with a rewriting of the medieval motif of Mother of Sorrows:

Matka Dolorosa
na wszystkich progach

2 For a detailed analysis of the reception of her work, see Aleksandra Pawlik-Kopek's book (2019).

rana otwarta
 wydarto jej drzwi
 ukradziono ogień

rwiała włosy
 ręce jak drzewa łamała
 włosami rękami ogień ratowała
 ogień żywy z ziemi
 z żył
 z krwi darła

teraz rozkłada ręce
 na progu woła
 s y n u
 s p a l o n e plecy
 s y n u
 spopielaty język
 s y n u
 dziecko z ogniem w ręce
 siejesz wojny
 gasisz miasta
 s y n u
 wyrwany ze mnie
 dziki płomieniu
 (*Matka Dolorosa*, PW, 230)

Mother Dolorosa
 an open wound
 on all doorsteps
 a door was torn from her
 fire was stolen from her

she was tearing her hair
 she was breaking arms like trees
 with her hair hands fire
 she was saving
 live fire from the earth
 from the veins
 blood she was tearing

now she spreads her hands
 on the doorstep she calls
 m y s o n
 burned back
 m y s o n
 ashen tongue
 m y s o n
 a child with fire in
 his hand
 you sow wars
 you extinguish cities
 s o n
 torn from me
 my wild flame

The mother's lament is not necessarily associated with the loss of her son, but rather with the theft of fire, once associated with the hearth and the cult of the Great Goddess,³ which in this poem becomes a tool of criminal activity. This theft is associated with the violence stemming from the exploitation of women's labor, which paved the way for patriarchal-military power, private property, and caste society (Lerner 1986: 141–160).

Thus, Ferenc superimposes the story of Sochy on the dethronement of the goddess and the degradation of her reproductive powers. The titular Mother Dolorosa refers us to the old pre-patriarchal traditions and brings to mind one of the many incarnations of the Great Goddess, specifically her darker counterpart, the suffering mother.⁴ As Marina Warner writes, the medieval motif of *Stabat Mater* originates from the pantheon of fertility goddesses who sacrifice some attribute of their own power to the forces of darkness and then mourn it (Warner 2013: 224).

Ferenc's lament of Mother Dolorosa refers not only to myths and images of female deities, but, above all, to the historical period characterized by a specific relationship to the land and reproduction, which accounted for the strength of community life. However, as this work was devalued, so was the entire sacred symbolism associated with the cult of the Goddess, nature and the mother. Luce

3 It does not seem that this poem was a subtle reference to the Promethean myth, as suggested by Pawlik-Kopek (2019: 154).

4 Anna Kohli writes that the tripartite nature of Mary represented in three colors, white, red and black, refers to the tripartite Great Goddess (Kohli 2007: 30).

Irigaray observes this transition in Greek philosophy, to which she devotes an entire book entitled *In the Beginning, She Was* (2013). She emphasizes that language in particular undergoes change, especially in its tendency to homogenize and erase all traces of this goddess-like power:

In fact, she doubly vanishes. In order to definitively close the logos upon itself, in order for the logos to speak with itself, the traces of a relation with her are said in the neuter.... Instead of saying: the world is born from her, and from my relation with her, the Western philosopher says: there is Being, there are beings, which is, or are, given without anyone who gives. There is, there are, without being born in a way, without any origin. There is, there are, mysteriously there. (Irigaray 2013: 4)

In Ferenc's poem, the theft of fire becomes a symbol of the devaluation and desecralization of women's creative powers, which are now put in the service of reproductive tasks, and women are delegated to the private and domestic spheres according to the new division of labor in patriarchal economies. Poems about the hardships of everyday life are the best way to show this. In the conditions of war, women's work creating and maintaining social life will be reduced to a struggle for survival, as in the poem *Matka wojenna* (Mother of War): "She ran ran / washing scraping cooking / potatoes carrots apples" (PW, 239).

It seems that Ferenc introduces goddesses into grief poems not only to euphemize the story of war trauma. In my opinion, this is a strategy aimed at appreciating reproductive work, elevating it to the rank of goddess-like creative powers in opposition to the deadly war machine. Therefore, we can risk the thesis that the goddess-like cycle of eternal birth, pointed out by other researchers (Pietruszewska-Kobiela 2010), is a clear expression of opposition to war damage and resistance to the economy of death that patriarchal-colonial capitalism had embodied in the form of fascist ideology. Therefore, reproductive work is shown here in its pre-capitalist form, i.e. one that refers to a special kind of bond between people and the earth and nature.

Ferenc, therefore, returns to these mythical images of the Goddess, nature and mother. To this end, she also reclaims the figure of the *Stabat Mater*, i.e. the suffering mother, who, contrary to the dogmas of the Catholic faith, is elevated to the rank of goddess. This deification, consisting in extending the image of the mother to all spheres of life, is in fact a gesture of appreciation for the work that produces life. In this context, the topic of maternal mourning becomes important, which is an expression not only of helplessness and grief after the loss of a son—in accordance with the current narrative in the Catholic

doctrine—but of active opposition to the destructive dimension of patriarchal politics. This is how Warner interprets the *Stabat Mater* grieving, which refers to the ancient cult of the goddess:

For she receives the broken body of her son in her arms and gazes upon his features with such avidity not only because she mourns her loss... but also because she is propitiating those same forces of sterility and death that the sacrifice of her son is attempting to appease. He is the blood offering, she the principle of the abiding earth. The tears she sheds are charged with the magic of her precious, incorruptible, undying body and have power to give life and make whole. (Warner 2013: 225)

Julia Kristeva draws attention to this subversive aspect of Mary's mourning in her famous essay *Stabat Mater*, in which she analyzes the moment when motherhood is deprived of its sanctity. It is in the tears of Mary, as Kristeva notes, that the goddess-like element of permanence, generation and bodily bond with the world survived. For they are—next to milk, another attribute of *Mater Dolorosa*, but successively erased from its Christian representations—“metaphors of non-language, of a ‘semiotic’ that does not coincide with linguistic communication” (Kristeva 1985: 143). This is where the subversive potential of female mourning comes into play. Kristeva continues, “The Mother and her attributes signifying suffering humanity thus become the symbol of a ‘return of the repressed’ in monotheism” (Kristeva 1985: 143). Moreover, in the face of the promise of resurrection, Mary's mourning and crying are a kind of scandal—as if she did not want to consent to the divine plan of salvation.

Since resurrection lies in the offing, and since as the Mother of God she ought to know that it does, nothing justifies Mary's anguish at the foot of the cross unless it is the desire to feel in her own body what it is like for a man to be put to death, a fate spared her by her female role as source of life. (Kristeva 1985: 144)

Thus, *Stabat Mater* becomes one of the figures of female grieving, which, as Nicole Loraux writes, has been a threat to the public sphere and its established order, based on military power and the cult of war, since the Greek times (Loraux 1998).⁵ It is literally a symbol of resistance to the forces of darkness and

5 According to Loraux, Greek women were not allowed to mourn publicly after losing a son who had been a soldier (Loraux 1998: 25).

death. It evokes the memory of the lost order, which is much like the “open wound” from Ferenc’s poem.

2. Poetic heresy

It can be said that Ferenc’s entire poetic work, as in the case of Tadeusz Różewicz’s poetry,⁶ is a great struggle with language, even though the poet writes directly in the *Psalm prowadzona na rzeź* (Psalm Led to Slaughter): “I come not to say anything” (PW 201–202), and in which she adds to *The Bitter Psalm*: “my words are rough / they hurt / they bleed” (PW 235). Giving testimony in the face of the end of the world becomes impossible. However, this impossibility stems from the peculiar experience of losing a mother.

The impossible grieving after a mother cannot cope with the poverty of language; it resists symbolization and risks falling into the state of utter asymbolism that Kristeva warned against: “If I did not agree to lose mother, I could neither imagine nor name her. The psychotic child is acquainted with that drama: such a child, being ignorant of metaphor, is an incompetent translator” (Kristeva 1992: 41). Although it becomes impossible for the daughter to regain her mother, Krystyna Kłosińska explains that she can invent a new language and break symbolic codes (Kłosińska 2010: 435). It is the saturated system of signs, a characteristic of poetic language, that becomes both a creative source and a kind of heresy making it possible to transcend the religion of the word.

Ferenc will perform such a heretical act in the poems referring directly to the pieta motif, in which there is a complete break with the traditional way of depicting Mary’s suffering. There is a sequence of reversals here: the first one is the replacement of the son with the daughter, as in the poem *Matka zastrzelona* (Mother Shot), where we are also dealing with a change of roles, as when the daughter addresses the mother as “my birth mother / child” (PW, 206); the second one introduces the image of the crucified Mary, as in the poem *Matka drewniana* (Wooden Mother): “She stood like a tree / heard her son dying / Mother and son bound / in one dying wood” (PW, 209). In one of the conversations, the poet refers to this topic directly. To the question: “Your mother is crucified and redemption comes through her” she replies in the following way: “Because that’s how it is” (Ferenc 2009a: 21–22).

6 Krzysztof Kłosiński, when writing about the symbolic fiasco in Różewicz’s *Ocalony* (Survivor), draws our attention to the exchange of signs that we find in the poem, which brings about a new reality (Kłosiński 2000: 185).

Maternal mourning thus depicted is based on father-son symbolism,⁷ as if Mother Dolorosa's suffering was meant to distract attention from the plan of divine salvation and bring her character closer to human suffering. That is perhaps why in this poem the mother's pain after the loss resembles labor pains. In this case, giving birth becomes giving life to death: "I am still giving birth—those separating / from the knees / Crying can be heard in the place of separation // open like a wound, the space calls out to them" (*Rodzone dzieci* – Children Being Born; Ferenc 1983b: 49). Kristeva recognizes that this pain is an inseparable trace of separation from the mother's body: "One does not bear children in pain, it's pain that one bears: the child is pain's representative and once delivered moves in for good" (Kristeva 1985: 138). This pain of separation becomes a keystone of mourning for Ferenc. It will gain the most moving expression in poems dedicated to a daughter's loss of a mother:

Tak mało wiem o tobie
 tak krótko cię miałam
 jak słoneczny zajac
 ledwo ci się stałam
 [...]
 (*Mother With Me*, PW, 210)

So little do I know about you
 so short was the time I had you
 like a sunny rabbit
 I barely became for you
 [...]

Another type of verbal heresy in Ferenc's poetry can be found in how Mary is depicted, specifically her multiformity, which the poet captures not through metonymy, but through diaphora, which multiplies and diversifies the meanings that mourning gains in this poetry in order to maximize it and show it on a macro scale (Szopa 2018: 191–192). The individual experience of loss grows in this poem and spreads to all areas of the surrounding world. As a result, the mother becomes omnipresent in the depicted world, and her numerous repetitions will be processed differently each time: at one point she appears in the

7 Pawlik-Kopek notices that in Ferenc's work God remains the most important of all beings and does not lose his god-like and holy dimension, with the exception of a cycle of poems dedicated to a mother's mourning (Pawlik-Kopek 2019: 115).

form of the Great Goddess and later as the Black Madonna. She also functions as a metaphor for a home; she is present as a broken jug, as the kitchen floor, as trees, specifically as cherry or ash trees. This diaphoric multiplication of meanings that refers to the figure of the mother brings to mind the mythical images of the body of the Great Goddess as the whole world (Brach-Czaina 1997: 30), as in the *Psalm z Marią* (Psalm with Maria):

Mario
 ze śladem pępowiny
 z piersią pękającą od nadmiaru mleka
 z dłonią jak kraina
 czułością i troską płynącą
 z szyją pochyloną w żywot wieczny
 z głową ciężącą od miłości
 jak arbuz
 ziarna pełna
 zaczyń
 ciało jak ciasto
 rosnące na wszystkie strony
 [...]
 (PW, 190)

Mary
 with a trace of the umbilical cord
 with a breast bursting with
 a surfeit of milk
 with a hand like a land
 flowing with
 affection and care
 with a neck craning towards
 eternal life
 with a head heavy with
 love
 like a watermelon
 full of seeds
 leaven
 body like dough
 rising in all
 directions

This maternal body-world is wrapped in a shroud of seemingly endless grieving, which is impossible to work through. Thus, grieving proceeds here on the basis of an economy different from that designed by Sigmund Freud (2009: 148). It functions outside the mechanism of sublimation and release of the “I” from the object of loss. In Ferenc’s poetry, the “I” is still entangled in loss and, thus, in a relationship with the other. Mourning grows indefinitely, crossing all boundaries. In fact, Sochy is here a “little Earth,” as we read in *Psalm z mojej ziemi* (Psalm from my Land), “on a tiny cell / tied with an umbilical cord / to the rest of the universe” (PW, 215).

The purpose of the diaphora here is to extend maternal grieving to the entire lost world of social relations and to take Ferenc’s poetry beyond the autobiographical context. Not only is the poet’s family lost, but the entire village community, and with it not only Sochy, but also—as we read in the motto to *Wypalona dolina* (The Burnt Valley)—“Oradour in France,” “Lidice in the Czech Republic,” “Mezzinote in Italy.” And one could add today—as Bucha in Ukraine and Gaza City in Palestine.

Infinite mourning is like an “open wound” in Ferenc’s poetry (*Matka Dolorosa*, PW, 230)—it is a kind of protest against the official policy of memory. It also proves that coming to terms with the death of others is in fact synonymous with forgetting.

3. A mournful protest

Passion poems and psalms are kept in the convention of folk songs by Ferenc, strongly focused around the cult of Mary, which has its origins in pre-Christian goddess beliefs. This context is of considerable importance when it comes to the role played by the figure of Mary in this poetry, who, as Irigaray writes in *The Mystery of Mary*, becomes a figure of radical justice (Irigaray 2021: 92). However, it is not about some form of legalistic or revengeful justice, but about the form of justice that refers to unconditional solidarity with all the victims of patriarchal-capitalist politics (Athanasίου 2017: 69). Therefore, the motif of *Stabat Mater* used by the poet should not be seen as an apology for traditional motherhood.⁸ On the contrary, I think that it gives rise to a wide-ranging ethical and political project, which will oscillate around the politics of grieving, and specifically whose lives—as Judith Butler would say—are grievable and whose lives are unreal, and thus entirely deprived of the status of “living.” It is here that

8 Contrary to Aleksandra Pawlik-Kopek (2019: 158), I do not believe that the figure of *Stabat Mater* created by Ferenc is always represented here in accordance with the Bible and portrayed as subjugated to God.

the potential of infinite grieving is revealed, because “without [it] there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life,” and thus a life unworthy of living, “and ungrieved when lost” (Butler 2011:59).

The weeping mother-goddess stands in this work, above all, on behalf of those whose lives have been deemed unworthy. First of all, it will be the inhabitants of Sochy, and with them all the victims of war crimes, such as the Jewish boy in the poem *Matka karmiąca* (Nursing Mother) (PW, 252). Paradoxically, this way of presenting Mary reveals elements of feminist politics in Ferenc’s work—Stabat Mater speaks on behalf of the oppressed here by the fact that she herself experiences pain, a point expressed directly by the poet:

In my imagination, she [Mother of God] is not associated with any religious image—with the exception of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa, I imagine them as flesh-and-bone mothers, women from villages who I knew from childhood, women who I know now. (Ferenc 2009a: 21–22)

The mournful lament is a wound in the collective memory, a kind of breach within a community governed by a specific way of organizing collective memory. The grieving inscribed in this poetry thus acquires a strictly political context—it refers to the question of how the loss of the other violates the boundaries of a given community. The question “Who am I without you?”, writes Butler, undermines the integrity of every “I,” every identity, and every community. Mary’s weeping disturbs this official policy of mourning, organized within the nationalist politics of recognition, which divides lives into those that are grievable and those that are easily exposed to violence. Marian mourning, which is a form of commemorating the most defenseless victims of wars, slaughters and genocides, could be seen as a protest against this destructive policy, the costs of which are usually borne by women, children, the elderly, the sick, those deprived of care and support. And that is why we will not find here the cult of soldiers and war heroes, but a lament after a broken jug, a cherry tree damaged by gunfire, broken rye ears—after some small world, with which the whole world came to an end.

4. Conclusion

Ferenc’s infinitive mourning of Mary mounts a clear protest against the destructive power of war and, at the same time, allows the poet to go beyond a simplistic depiction of motherhood, often presented as a force resisting the deadly war machine. This would suggest that a maternal-protective vision of the world with the participation of women would be a remedy for the conflagration of war. Such

a way of perceiving motherhood places women on the side of those who would each time take on themselves the burden of war massacres and bear the costs of the fight for survival. In Ferenc's poetry, on the contrary, it is maternal mourning and the possibility of loss inherent in it that becomes a protest against the machinery of war. The image of a suffering mother breaks completely with the traditional maternal role, understood as a woman's social duty to provide more soldiers or, more generally, labour power to the state or capital. In Niobe's poem, addressed directly to God, we are dealing with such a protest, which is in fact a refusal to perform reproductive labour in conditions of war:

[...]
 Posłuchaj
 jednego nie uczyniłabym po raz drugi
 nie przyniosłabym Ci na świat dziecka
 tej trudnej chwały

Na ziemi posadziłabym Ci gołe drzewa
 gołą ziemię posadziłabym
 bez płaczących kamieni
 Wśród nich podejrzewam
 trzecią
 czwartą Niobe
 (*Niobe*, PW, 262–263)

Listen
 there is one thing I would not do
 the second time
 I would not have brought you
 a child into the world
 this difficult glory

I would have planted
 bare trees for you
 I would have planted
 bare earth
 Without weeping
 Stones
 I suspect there is
 the third

fourth Niobe
among them

I read the poet's decision to introduce goddess-like themes as a manifestation of the feminist consciousness present in the 1960s and 1970s. This communion with the sacred divinity of the world, with corporeality and nature, so strongly present in Ferenc's early poetry, is associated with a kind of transgression, which in this case takes the form of endless mourning. It is marked by a constant movement of opening, which—like opening wounds—will paradoxically be a process of continuous growth, budding or rebirth from the ashes of a burnt village. This way of representation should be read not only as praise of earth's fertility, nature or femininity, but as a movement going beyond the given material and social conditions. According to Kristeva's maternal philosophy, transgression is the ability to start over. This "duration with new beginnings" (Kristeva 2009: 114), which so strongly marks Ferenc's mournful poetry, is tantamount to opening the imagination and tilting the world towards the future. It is the mother's mourning that plays a special role here—it can become the seed of something new, namely a world free from suffering, harm and injustice.

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| Abstract

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Stabat Mater: The Impossible Mourning in Teresa Ferenc’s Poetry

The article discusses the feminist politics of mourning in the poetry of Teresa Ferenc. The main assumption of the text is to highlight the subversive potential

of the medieval motive of *Stabat Mater*. By referring to feminist anthropology, as well as the psychoanalyst theory of Julia Kristeva, I argue that behind the figure of mother's grieving lies not only the poet's opposition to war, but also an ethical imperative of solidarity with others, i.e. nameless victims of any kind injustice provided by patriarchal-capitalist policy.

Keywords: Stabat Mater, mourning, feminism, Great Goddess, women's poetry

| Bio

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