

# teksty

D R U G I E

## Czesław Miłosz and the Polish School of Poetry

**Jan BŁOŃSKI**

Stubborn Persistence of Baroque

**Ryszard NYCZ**

Four Poetics:  
Miłosz and Literary Movements

**Marek ZALESKI**

Instead

**Clare CAVANAGH**

The Limits of Lyric:  
Western Theory and Postwar Polish Practice

**Arent van NIEUKERKEN**

Czesław Miłosz and the tradition  
of European Romanticism

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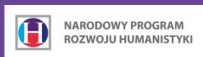
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# Introduction

*That Czesław Miłosz was a poet is a well known fact. But throughout his whole life he also remained a man of letters who practiced multiple forms of writing: novels, essays, reviews, press articles, amongst others. Already in the early thirties, his first steps in poetry were accompanied by editorial activities performed as a co-founder of the “Żagary” literary group and contributor to its periodicals. Kultura was the most prominent magazine Miłosz wrote for beginning in 1951. It was a Polish monthly published abroad, a centre of independent thought, and a strong influence on the intellectuals of Poland and several states of the Soviet camp before the system change in Central Europe. Until the very end, Miłosz continued to respond to events through his writing. He published much, in literary journals and daily papers.*

*In his literary journalism, he aimed to set a new direction for the poetry of his day. Naturally, the tone and content of his utterance could not have remained unaltered over eight decades of his attempts: from youthful appeals to agitational poems and brutal stylistics of the manifestos in the 30’s, through the mild reproof directed in the 80’s at the young poets who, in their struggle against the falling Communist regime, forgot about the independent rules of art, to didactic examples of haiku and other forms of “objectivist poetry” offered to the succeeding generations of writers (and their readers) in the 90’s. As it is often the case of poets writing prose about poetry, Miłosz’s assessments and directions for his fellows derived from the dilemmas, explorations and decisions that paved the way for the developments in his own writing.*

*While his journalistic activities directed at the Polish audiences were meant to influence the course of Polish literature, Miłosz had a different goal when he addressed the English reader, whom he wanted to present with what he believed to be most valuable in the work of contemporary Polish poets and most distinctively Polish. On a few occasions he spoke of “Polish school of poetry,” by which he meant a model of poetics as well as a certain type of sensitivity and attitude to the world expressed through it – the reference field of Miłosz’s term is most clearly delineated in his Harvard lectures (Czesław Miłosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1983). He believed that the importance of Polish poetry laid in the fact that our writers drew conclusions from the experience of WWII and the post-war years: “In it [Polish poetry] a peculiar fusion of the individual and historical took place, which means that events burdening a whole community*

are perceived by a poet as touching him in a most personal manner. Then poetry is no longer alienated" (94-95). He concludes: "The poetic act changes with the amount of background reality embraced by the poet's consciousness. In our century that background is, in my opinion, related to the fragility of those things we call civilization or culture. What surrounds us, here and now, is not guaranteed. It could just as well not exist – and so man constructs poetry out of the remnants found in ruins" (97).

Miłosz himself is a major figure among the poets of the Polish school and a few years ago, beginning with the poet's scattered remarks on the subject, Dutch Slavacist, Arent van Nieukerken, put forth a remarkably astute outline of a historical literary synthesis of this particular development in the Polish poetry (*Ironiczny konceptyzm. Nowoczesna polska poezja metafizyczna w kontekście anglosaskiego modernizmu*, Kraków: "Universitas", 1998). Van Nieukerken presents the history of the movement on the example of its several prominent representatives, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century precursor of the "school," Cyprian Norwid (1821 – 1983) to Stanisław Barańczak (b. 1946). Van Nieukerken calls them "ironic moralizers," a term borrowed from Barańczak, and believes the Polish school to be a distinctive modification of modernism, parallel to its Western counterpart.

The present volume offers a selection of articles published in *Teksty Drugie* and concerning Miłosz, as well as those 20<sup>th</sup> century Polish poets that he focused on in his commentaries and translations. One should bear in mind that although presented texts were published between 2001-2007, they describe much older literary phenomena. Today, the "Polish school of poetry," as Miłosz saw it, is a historical term and the authors that he translated and commented on, such as Stanisław Barańczak, Miron Białoszewski, Zbigniew Herbert, Wisława Szymborska, Anna Świrszczyńska (Anna Swir), Tadeusz Różewicz or Aleksander Wat are part of the Polish canon.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century was one of the darker periods in the history of Europe, especially in those of its parts that Timothy D. Snyder referred to as the "bloodlands." At the same time, it was, in its own way, a good period for those poets who managed to fulfill their public mission without sacrificing the requirements formulated for art by the European modernism.

The thematic range and the wealth of expression encountered by Miłosz scholars in his work is intimidating, and perhaps this is why the title of Jan Błoński's book *Miłosz jak świat* [*Miłosz as the World*] (Kraków: Znak, 1998) often resurfaces in their analyses. At the same

*time, despite its extravagant richness, Miłosz's oeuvre is very distinctive. Ryszard Nycz, editor in chief of Teksty Drugie and one of the leading Polish literary theorists, believes that "a continuous quest beyond the [available] word determines the general direction and the dominant idea of Miłosz's work." In his essay, however, Nycz focuses on something else – on the transformations of Miłosz's poetry. He distinguishes four phases of its development: "poetic of visionary commonality" ("an attempt at...revealing the muted or marginalised aspects of everyday life and existential experience"); "poetic of public discourse" (which "crosses the boundaries of the traditional lyrical language, opening its domain to all types and genres of modern writing...and to the entire cultural universe of discourse"); "poetic of parabolic autobiography" (that Miłosz discovered "in his private experience of the past," "open to the future by its very (human) nature, a reality whose permanence, order and meaning lie in a constant process of representing, telling and interpreting."); and finally, "poetic of inhuman indication." Miłosz's last poetic is a radical departure in his work, undermining the very foundations of the "Polish school." Because, as Nycz believes, "to indicate the existence of the inhuman is to indicate a world which cannot be framed by human categories, a world that is without a past and future and can do without the human experience of time which cannot be represented, told or interpreted."*

*Arent van Nieuwerkerken does not attempt to capture the full range of Miłosz's poetry but discusses one of its major motifs: the striving to overcome empirical time and to present in a single synthetic attempt several different chronological moments, believed to give a sense of the divine perspective on human reality, as "at the end of the road that has been designated by Miłosz's poetics of epiphany stands a theological postulate." Nieuwerkerken traces the evolution of Miłosz's "existential autobiography" (that he defines differently than Nycz) and places it against the comparative background of the work by, among others, William Wordsworth, a representative of the Romantic movement who "proposed an integral interpretation of man's being-in-the-world by creating an existential autobiography that went far beyond the somnambulist, 'lunar' aspects of existence."*

*The Romantic tradition has remained the tradition of Polish poetry from the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present day and the reason for it is simple: it was also the period when our most prominent literary masterpieces were composed. One can reject Romantic ideology, as several generations of thinkers, politicians, and men of letters did and continue to do, but to dismiss the work of Malczewski, Mickiewicz, Słowacki, and Norwid amounts to as much as dismissing the role of Shakespeare, Milton, and Wordsworth in English literature would. This, however, is not the case of the Baroque, an epoch shaping the material culture and the mentality of Poles before Romanticism. Jan Błoński (1931-2009), one of the most renowned participants of Polish intellectual life and an astute commentator of 20<sup>th</sup> century literature, believes that the presence of the Baroque in Poland is "so obvious...that it is almost invisible." In "The Stubborn Persistence of the Baroque," Błoński sketches this presence with a few light strokes and concludes:*

*The baroque in Poland was strongly influenced by the Counter-Reformation (or Catholic Reformation, especially in its Jesuit form). It retained, especially at the very beginning, close connections to Rome: the Church of Saints Peter and Paul in Cracow was built only a few years after the Church of the Gesù in Rome. It was this cultural proximity that sensitized*



it to the growing complication of forms inherited from the Renaissance and embedded in the memory and imagination of artists and poets. But Polish baroque also relied on the not so distant medieval tradition, as well as the local ones, especially in eastern Poland where it slowly acquired its increasingly Sarmatian features.

Those three characteristics of the baroque in Poland continue to return today, subversively echoed and in a distorted manner: Gombrowicz winks at the reader, pretending to be a Sarmatian, Miłosz's work reaches back to its religious heritage, while other writers and poets reestablish their connection to the baroque through affinity for conceit and linguistic sophistication.

*The concept of a Polish school of poetry was embraced by American Slavist, Clare Cavanagh, the author of Lyric Poetry and Modern Politics: Russia, Poland, and the West (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2009), inspired by Miłosz's ideas. In "The Limits of Lyric: Western Theory and Postwar Polish Practice" Cavanagh returns to the kernel of his thought: the complex relation of poetry and history. With the example of several poets (Miłosz, Herbert, Szymborska, and Zagajewski) she reveals how those authors, heavily influenced by a history of oppression and the experience of "mega-history" promoted by the power apparatus, managed nonetheless to develop a disillusioned but non-nihilistic attitude to art as a historical phenomenon. The heaviness of reality is always present in their poems but at the same time there is also a will to overcome it: "All efforts to step outside time, the lyric reminds us, are doomed to fail in advance, which is why the lyric poet must struggle time and again to achieve the "revenge of a mortal hand" [Szymborska], the temporary reprieve from mortality that is all we can hope for at best."*

*Among the most important characteristics of the Polish school is the imperative to "give testimony" which refers primarily to the communal fate and express the sense of being rooted in history. Miłosz believed Zbigniew Herbert to give the fullest expression to this postulate. Contrasting both poets, Bogdana Carpenter points to the creative differences in their work, both in their understanding of the idea of "testimony" and its poetic incarnations ("Ethical and metaphysical testimony in the poetry of Zbigniew Herbert and Czesław Miłosz.") Most importantly, she emphasises, Herbert never moves away from his postulates while Miłosz "breaks the paradigm that he co-created in the 40's, demarcating, not for the first time, new tracks and grounds for the Polish poetry. The interest in metaphysical poetry noticeable in the last few years among young poets and critics is a proof that the author of Theological Treatise remains a faithful – and an unmatched – witness not only to his own time."*

*Among the eminent poets of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were several who rivalled Miłosz, each of them adopting a different attitude to the world and formulating a separate poetic. Some of them followed the example Miłosz set through his own work (for instance, Zbigniew Herbert), others consciously reached for different means (Tadeusz Różewicz). There were also those who wrote as if the "Miłosz phenomenon" was non-existent, even though both their readers and authors themselves could not have possibly ignore the shadow cast by Miłosz on the entirety of Polish poetry (such as in the case of Miłosz Białoszewski).*

*Białoszewski deserves closer attention as he inhabits very distant peripheries of the Polish school. He differed from Miłosz in all aspects, from the choice themes to the formal side of his work. They had a different attitude to language as well. Miłosz attempted to touch directly*

major issues of his era and final, metaphysical matters, all while trying to protect the Polish language from the mundane. Although he did use lower registers and rarely abandoned irony, one of his main goals was to resurrect the “high” style. Białoszewski, on the contrary, avoided exalted notions at all cost, and his linguistic material of choice was the ordinary and the colloquial. He also freely transformed morphological structures. And yet, major issues (historical and trans-historical) continue to resurface in his work, obeying his own rules derived from the “low” speech. The manner in which these two poets are written about is symptomatic of the readers’ attitudes: Miłosz is referred to as the “Nobel Prize winner” and Białoszewski as “Miron” (no other Polish poet canonized by the audiences has so far been referred to with this degree of familiarity.)

It is one of Miłosz’s great merits that he saw the value of, and attempted to translate to English, the work of a poet so radically different from his own poetic. The linguistic specificity of Białoszewski heavily limits the potential for a successful translation – the degree of Miłosz’s achievement in this regard, as well as his strategies, are discussed by Tomasz Łysak in “Miron Białoszewski as interpreted by Czesław Miłosz.”

Białoszewski’s work is also the focus of Marek Zaleski’s “Białoszewski: Idyllic.” Zaleski connects the striking affirmation of the world in Białoszewski’s debut-making 1956 collection, *The Revolution of Things* to the Orphic tradition of faith in the creative power of poetry found in modernist art. Zaleski analyses the Orphic element within the framework of the “idyll-of-self” and its particular subgenre, “idyll of one’s own room” (both terms introduced by Renato Poggioli).

He discovers a different incarnation of the Orphic tradition – of postmodern rather than modern character – in “Orpheus and Eurydice” (2002), one of Miłosz’s later (and most important) long poems. As he did in his essay on Białoszewski, in “Instead” Zaleski traces the connections between the antique tradition and the 20<sup>th</sup> century transformations of the myth that “has become a philosophical parable [while] Orpheus himself – the eponym of the poet and the epitome of the adventure of poetry.” The message of the parable is sinister, however, and Miłosz, contrary to his previous work that affirmed existence in the spirit of Christian theology, appears to agree with his intellectual antagonists such as Nietzsche and Blanchot, insists Zaleski. He believes “Orpheus and Eurydice” to put “an end to the hope pervading Miłosz’s work, the hope of resurrection of what was in the word.”

In his attempts to encourage the interest of the English audiences in the poets of the Polish school, Miłosz made efforts to maintain objectivity and suppress his own preferences and dislikes. These were poets that he knew personally, several were his friends, others he debated against. Most of them make an appearance in Miłosz’s own poetry as well, and it is in his poetry that Miłosz reveals his deeply emotional and diversified attitude towards other authors, discussed by poet and critic Jacek Łukasiewicz in his essay (“Poet on poets”). Łukasiewicz reveals how the demands of literary conventions shaped the character and poetic “definitions” of their work. He very aptly comments on one of the more intriguing definitions, the metaphor referring to Tadeusz Różewicz: “he digs in black soil/ is both the spade and the mole cut in two by the spade.”

Women have always played an important role in Miłosz’s work, and an even more important one in his private life. Popularizing the work of Anna Świrszczyńska (Anna Świr),

both in Poland and abroad, is one of his great achievements. Świrszczyńska strongly emphasised her womanhood (or, perhaps, even her “baba-hood”). In one of her essays, Anna Nasilowska offered a typology of women appearing in Miłosz’s work. The present volume includes another essay by Nasilowska, one devoted to the worldview and poetic of selected 20<sup>th</sup> century female poets. Nasilowska places them between two poles: that of androgyny seen as an idea of identity in which “the speaker of the poem neutralizes the compulsion to define themselves in each situation with regards to gender that is present in normal social life.” The other pole posits womanhood as a “strong, basic and irreducible part of identity.” Nasilowska concludes:

Those two patterns of identity do not exhaust the issue of poetic creations concerning womanhood, they only outline one of the tension lines. The difficulty in capturing phenomena has several causes. The feminist revolution took place in the Polish poetry without the feminist debate; today’s categories do not fully correspond to the historical situation. Sometimes one cannot even describe the internal convictions contained in the text with the categories proposed by the Western feminism which continues to emphasize the constraint (and oppressiveness) of heterosexuality whereas Polish poets willingly mythologize the heterosexual act of sex seeing in the process the value of rebellion, of crossing the cultural norm that in fact imposes silence.

Her last sentence refers to the state of Polish poetry in the 1960’s. Androgyny was at an earlier stage of its development but its elements survived, and sometimes finds an original expression, for instance, in the poetry of Wisława Szymborska, Nasilowska notes.

Szymborska’s poetry is discussed in Małgorzata Czermińska’s “Ekphrases in the poetry of Wisława Szymborska.” Czermińska is the author of a monumental work on the literary motif of the cathedral (Gotyk i pisarze. Topika opisu katedry, Gdańsk : Słowo/obraz terytoria, 2005). Her essay presented in this volume focuses on ekphrasis in Szymborska’s work and concludes:

The descriptive element in ekphrases is always dependent on the interpretative idea which allows us to say something interesting about the problems which interest the poet also in her other works, thematically unrelated to the aesthetic qualities of any painting. These problems are mainly time, the creative power of an artist, human cruelty throughout history and different ways of understanding femininity. Ultimately, these ekphrases say more about the imagination of the poet than about the works of art they depict. However, they say it differently than in poems where the space between the poet and her readers is not occupied by any painting, sculpture or photograph serving as an intermediary.

Photography, or rather the process of taking photographs as a recurrent theme in poetry, is discussed by Cezary Zalewski in “The one moment. Photographing in Polish poetry of the twentieth century.” with the example of three poems (by Tytus Czyżewski, Stanisław Barańczak and Janusz Szuber.) Czyżewski is included in the Polish poetic canon as the author of *Pastorałki*, a brilliant folk-dadaist conglomerate (which is also how he is remembered by Miłosz in *Treatise on Poetry*, however, his “Mediumiczno-magnetyczna fotografia poety Brunona Jasińskiego” [A Mediumistic-magnetic Photograph of Poet Brunon Jasiński] derives from a different area of interest – spiritualist practices that the poets and writers of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were involved in. Over half a century later, Barańczak’s “Zdjęcie”

*[A Photograph]* offers a concise image of the American mentality as seen by the author, having newly immigrated to the US from Eastern Europe, not differing in his diagnosis from the one presented by another observer of American custom, Jean Baudrillard. Finally, the most recent among the three poems, Szuber's "Eliasz Puzet's photographing schoolgirls from the Higher Institute of Educational Science in S. during the picnic in May 1902" evokes a scene from the life of Polish countryside. Despite thematic differences and the broad time span that they encompass, all the poems offer a common "thanatological conclusion," as "photographing (and photography) can now be used to penetrate different discourses, uncovering in them a more or less hidden fascination with death."

Miłosz believed, as his great predecessor Cyprian Norwid did, that one of his major literary obligations is saying farewell to departing friends and respected representatives of public life. Polish history has offered numerous occasions for poems on the subject. A similar attempt to commemorate can be found in the poetry of Tadeusz Różewicz but, as Wordsworth observes, "without the belief in immortality, wherein these several desires originate, neither monuments nor epitaphs, in affectionate or laudatory commemoration of the deceased, could have existed in the world." Norwid and Miłosz followed from the same assumption. So did Różewicz but he no longer believed in immortality, nor did see the faith in it in contemporary culture. Hence his dilemmas, analysed in detail by Hanna Marciniak who begins her discussion with the above quoted passage from Wordsworth. ("Our monuments are ambiguous...": *On Różewicz's Epitaphs.*)

The presence of Stanisław Barańczak – poet, translator, literary critic and Harvard professor, and previously a democratic activist in Communist Poland – has been distinctly visible on our intellectual scene. One of his most important collections, *Surgical Precision* (1998), is discussed by Jerzy Kandziora in "That which is slipping away": *On Exposing the Idiom in Stanisław Barańczak's "Surgical Precision."* In his essay Kandziora, who published a thorough study of the poet (*Ocalony w gmachu wiersza: o poezji Stanisława Barańczaka*, 2007) offers an analysis of the linguistic features of Barańczak's poetry in selected, particularly distinctive poems. Kandziora begins with observations on the stylistic choices of the title poem of *Surgical Precision* and moves to more general remarks, concluding: "I think that this autothematic frame, bearing the message: 'My poems are just uncertain indications of something that we should not 'throw away' as 'we may need it soon' " helps to understand why "Surgical Precision" gave its title to the entire collection and in some sense supports all of Stanisław Barańczak's work, so much inclined towards the Unknowable."

The volume closes with Janusz Sławiński, one of the most prominent figures in our literary studies of the last five decades ("Unassigned (XV)"). His collection of private notes, consisting of impeccably composed self-contained units typical of the author, discusses the poems written after the imposition of martial law by the decrepit Communist regime on 13 January 1981. Work of that period did not prove to have had a lasting impact, nor did it result in outstanding texts or innovative poetics, but it very well exemplifies the dilemmas faced by every poet required to take a stand against political violence that changes the very basis of social life. Sławiński analyses anonymous, popular and quasi-folk writing (extremely popular at that time) as well as the work of recognised authors. The former revealed and integrated

*previously dispersed sense of alienation from the political system imposed after WWII, the latter either reaches for the historico-philosophical stereotypes of the Polish Romanticism, or – in form of commemorative poetry – documents events from the perspective of democratic activists, usually interned at that time. Sławski's concise remarks provide a background for a better understanding of the fragile balance achieved by the prominent poets discussed earlier in the volume, balance between social activism and the innate rules of art. They may also serve as an epitaph for the Polish school of poetry.*

**Zdzisław ŁAPIŃSKI**

*Translation: Anna Warso*



## Clare CAVANAGH

### The Limits of Lyric: Western Theory and Postwar Polish Practice

I have felt that the problem of my time  
should be defined as Poetry and History.  
Czeslaw Milosz,  
“A Poet Between East and West” (1977)

#### I. The Lyric Under Seige

Poetry and history, poetry and society, poetry and politics: according to many recent Anglo-American critics, these phrases pair virtual antonyms. In the ideological criticism that has dominated the American academy in recent years, the lyric has come to serve as a convenient stand-in for “aesthetic isolationism” generally, that is, for art’s apparent “refusal of life actually conducted in actual society,” which in fact amounts to a “complicity with class-interested strategies of smoothing over historical conflict and contradictions with claims of natural and innate organization” (Lentricchia 94-5; Wolfson 191-2). With the advent of Romanticism, Terry Eagleton explains, all art was ostensibly rescued “from the material practices, social relations and ideological meanings in which it is always caught up, and raised to the status of a solitary fetish” (21). And Romanticism’s favored form, the lyric, is invariably the worst offender in such a socially irresponsible sleight-of-hand.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Frank Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 94-95. Susan Wolfson, “‘Romantic Ideology’ and the Values of Aesthetic Form,” in *Aesthetics and Ideology*, ed. George Levine (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 191-192. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 21.

The sins for which the lyric has been taken to task are many. To critics reared on post-structuralist theory, lyric poetry manifests a suspicious commitment to a slew of discredited values. It stubbornly buttresses the bourgeois myth of individual autonomy, or so the argument runs. It privileges personal voice over postmodern textuality; it seeks to circumvent history through attention to aesthetic form; it turns its back on the public realm in its quest for private truths; and it places transcendental timelessness over active engagement in the here-and-now. The Romantic clichés from which these charges stem have been challenged by disgruntled New Historicists and die-hard formalists alike. Still they persist: they have become staples of recent criticism.<sup>2</sup>

The ideological critics have taken their lead in large part from Mikhail Bakhtin in creating a lyric antipode to the particular vision of art and society that they themselves wish to advance. The lyric, as Bakhtin sees it, is a deplorably anti-social genre. The poet's "utopian" goal is to "speak timelessly" from an "Edenic world" "far removed from the petty rounds of everyday life." "Authoritarian, dogmatic, and conservative," Bakhtin's poet struggles to assume "a complete single-personed hegemony over his own language," destroying in the process "all traces" "of other people," "of social heteroglossia and diversity of language" (Morson and Emerson 322-3; Bakhtin 287, 296-298).<sup>3</sup>

It is not surprising that this reactionary foe of otherness and diversity should find itself under fire in the American academy. Not surprisingly, recent critics also overlook the distinctive role that poetry has played in modern Eastern European history. And this is unfortunate, since that role runs directly counter to the assumptions informing current discussions of the lyric. Plato famously expelled all trouble-making poets from his ideal kingdom of the mind: Plato's poet, a natural democrat, was "of no use to heads of state," as Mark Edmundson remarks. The Polish poet Aleksander Wat was quick to see the analogy between Plato's republic and the repressive regimes of post-war Eastern Europe. "Plato ordered us cast out/ of the City where Wisdom reigns./ In a new Ivory Tower made of (human) bones,"

<sup>2</sup> For recent accounts of the lyric under siege, see inter alia: Paul Breslin, "Shabine among the Fishmongers: Derek Walcott and the Suspicion of Essences" (unpublished essay); Mark Edmundson, *Literature against Philosophy, Plato to Derrida: A Defense of Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Eileen Gregory, *H. D. and Hellenism: Classical Lines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), esp. 129-139; Mark Jeffreys, "Ideologies of Lyric: A Problem of Genre in Contemporary Anglophone Poetics," *PMLA*, vol. 110, no. 2 (March, 1995), 196-205; Susan J. Wolfson, "'Romantic Ideology' and the Values of Aesthetic Form," in *Aesthetics and Ideology*, ed. George Levine (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 188-218; Sarah Zimmerman, *Romanticism, Lyricism and History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 322-323. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, tr. Caryl Emerson and Mikhail Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 287, 296-298.



he writes in his poem "Dark Light" (11).<sup>4</sup> But why should the lyric poets who, according to current doctrine, complacently uphold the bourgeois status quo prove to be so troublesome to left-wing dictators? How do the self-absorbed reactionaries of recent theory become Eastern Europe's subversives?

"In Central and Eastern Europe," Czeslaw Miłosz observes, "the word 'poet' has a somewhat different meaning from what it has in the West. There a poet does not merely arrange words in beautiful order. Tradition demands that he be a 'bard,' that his songs linger on many lips, that he speak in his poems of subjects of interest to all the citizens" (175).<sup>5</sup> In Poland and Russia alike, poets have been called upon for nearly two centuries to serve as their nations' "second government," in Solzhenitsyn's phrase. The heavy load of social and civic responsibility that Poland's writers were expected to shoulder was, if anything, still greater than that of their Russian counterparts. The partitions that erased their nation from the map of Europe in the late eighteenth century meant that Poland's great Romantics – Mickiewicz, Norwid, Slowacki – and their literary offspring felt compelled to replace their vanished state itself through their own poetry and prose. And, as Miłosz's remarks suggest, both the poets and their oppressed compatriots took such obligations very seriously.

The political aspirations of England's and America's romantics remained unrealized: hence Shelley's famous "unacknowledged legislators," who stand unfailingly on the side of "great and free developments of the national will," but are spurned by the very nations whose interests they seek to serve. Perhaps for this reason the Anglo-American critical tradition has tended to highlight lyric poetry's impracticable utopianism over its complex engagement with human history and society. It is not just the ideological critics who see the lyric chiefly as the creation of literary isolationists in search of an aesthetic Shangri-La that lies beyond the reach of human history. This tradition has a far deeper pedigree. The Anglo-American New Critics famously placed a frame around the lyric's iconic text with their well-wrought urns and verbal icons, as they sought to move it beyond the reach of erring adherents to various biographical heresies and intentional fallacies. And indeed each lyric poem appears to come complete with its own built-in margin of safety in the shape of the white page that seemingly serves to preserve it against unwanted incursions from the outside world. Of all literary genres, the lyric poem would seem to come closest to the ideally self-enclosed *objets d'art*, be they Grecian urns or calligrammes, that modern poets from Keats to Yeats, from Baudelaire to Apollinaire, have been celebrated in their verse.

This is precisely the vision of lyric poetry espoused in Sharon Cameron's influential *Lyric Time* (1979), to give just one example. In lyric poetry, Cameron explains, experience "is arrested, framed, and taken out of the flux of history": "[Lyric poems] insist that meaning depends upon the severing of incident from context,

<sup>4</sup> Edmundson, *Literature against Philosophy*, 6. Aleksander Wat, *Ciemne swieczidlo* (Paris: Libella, 1968), 11.

<sup>5</sup> Czeslaw Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, tr. Jane Zielonko (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 175.

as if only isolation could guarantee coherence. The lyric's own presence on a page, surrounded as it is by nothing, is a graphic representation of that belief." (71).<sup>6</sup> According to friends and foes alike, then, the lyric strives to be a text without context; it aspires to absolute freedom from contingency, to unconditional deliverance from the vicissitudes and ambiguities of time-bound human being.

The way we perceive individual literary works is conditioned by our cultural and personal "horizon of expectations," Hans Robert Jauss cautions (44).<sup>7</sup> The same holds true for genres. Polish history has placed very different demands on the lyric than the Anglo-American tradition, and has activated different possibilities in the process. Since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Poland's acknowledged legislators have met with a reception that Shelley and his contemporaries could scarcely imagine.<sup>8</sup> To give one particularly vivid example – the Warsaw student riots of 1968 were sparked by the closing of a production of Mickiewicz's romantic verse drama "Forefathers' Eve, Part II," which contained, so the authorities feared, inflammatory anti-Russian sentiments. Shelley could only dream of such a reaction to his "Prometheus Unbound" or "Cenci." And as my example suggests, modern history only widened the rift that divided East from West for much of the century just past: perhaps it takes the fate of the lyric and its makers in an explicitly utopian state to underscore the powerful *antiutopian* strains at work in modern poetry.

In any case, the Anglo-American critic requires a radically shifted angle of vision in order to do justice to the place of poetry in modern Polish history. The lyric might just as easily be conceived – or so the poets of modern Poland imply – not as a utopian genre, but as a genre based on a recognition of boundaries and limits, the limits that its own form so graphically displays. It is arguably the genre best equipped to explore the parameters that both define and restrict human existence. The lyric may give voice to dreams of another, better world. But it must also address, not least through its very form, the realities that resist such flights of fancy: the lyric traveler to distant lands must keep checking, in Adam Zagajewski's phrase, "to make sure he still [has] his return ticket/to the ordinary places where we live" (38). The lyric, by its nature, is forced to take up the question of what it means to have a individual point of view, to be rooted in a particular time and place, even a particular species: "Why after all this one and not the rest?/ Why this specific self, not in a nest,/ but a house? ... Why on earth now, on Tuesday of all days,/ and why on earth...?" Wislawa

<sup>6</sup> Sharon Cameron, *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 71.

<sup>7</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," in Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, tr. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 44.

<sup>8</sup> I don't wish to idealize the lot of acknowledged legislators. Szymborska, Herbert, Zagajewski, Baranczak: all have followed Miłosz's lead in their attempts to revise or even reject outright the politically engaged stance that the Polish tradition demands from its national bards, a stance that often operates at cross-purposes, so these poets have argued, with the very lyricism that animates their verse.

Szyborska asks in her lyric "Astonishment" (128).<sup>9</sup> Viewed from this perspective, the lyric is a self-consciously historical and social genre to its core.

## 2. Reframing the Verbal Icon

"The Soul selects her own Society-/ Then shuts the Door": in their study of Mikhail Bakhtin, Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson take Dickinson's defense of lyric privacy to speak for the innately solipsistic nature of the genre generally. But the picture looks rather different in Eastern Europe. The subversive potentials of lyric poetry are perhaps clearest in a society committed to the eradication of the individual both in theory and, not infrequently, in practice. What Mandelstam calls the "accidental, personal" voice of lyric poetry acquires a singular power under such circumstances (Bakhtin 320).<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, one of Dickinson's greatest Polish admirers, Stanislaw Baranczak, hints at the threat that the lyric poses in a totalitarian state in his poem "Fill Out Legibly," which suggests how Eastern Europe's purveyors of Orwellian Newspeak might have perceived Dickinson's "letter to the World/That never wrote to Me." "Does he write letters to himself? (yes, no)," the unnamed framers of an ominous questionnaire demand – and it's all too clear what the right answer should be (Baranczak 69). "Poetry is not heard, but overheard," John Stuart Mill remarks in one well-known definition of the lyric's audience (qtd. in Benfey 53). But lyric eavesdropping takes on new meaning in cultures where the walls have not just ears, but microphones: in "Moscow's evil living space," "the walls are damn thin," Mandelstam complains, just in case state-monitored poets should take a notion to deviate from their assigned task of "teaching the hangmen to warble" (196-7). In the lyric, T. S. Eliot insists, the poet speaks "to himself – or to nobody" (96). But just such soliloquys come under scrutiny in Wislawa Szymborska's "Writing a Resume": "Write as if you'd never talked to yourself/and always kept yourself at arm's length," the solicitous speaker advises (205).<sup>11</sup>

Even the seemingly harmless confession that William Carlos Williams tapes to his refrigerator in "This is Just to Say" – "I have eaten/ the plums/ that were in the icebox// and which / you were probably saving for breakfast" – could be given

<sup>9</sup> Adam Zagajewski, *Mysticism for Beginners*, tr. Clare Cavanagh (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1997), 38. Wislawa Szymborska, *Poems New and Collected 1957-1997*, tr. Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 128.

<sup>10</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, 320.

<sup>11</sup> Emily Dickinson, *Final Harvest*, ed. Thomas Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1961), 55, 103. Stanislaw Baranczak, *Wybor wierszy i przekladow* (Warsaw: Panstwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1997), 69. Mill is quoted in Christopher Benfey, *Emily Dickinson and the Problem of Others* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 53. Mandelstam, *Sobranie sochinenii*, v. 1, 196-197. T. S. Eliot, "The Three Voices of Poetry," *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1961), 96. Szymborska, *Poems New and Collected*, 205.

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a sinister spin by a suspicious state, or so Baranczak's "2/8/80: And Nobody Warned Me" suggests:

And no one warned me that liberty  
might also lie in this: I'm  
sitting in the station house with drafts of my own poems  
hidden (how ingenious!) in my long johns,  
while five detectives with higher educations  
and even higher salaries waste time  
analyzing trash they've taken from my pockets:  
tram tickets, a dry cleaning receipt, a dirty  
handkerchief and a baffling (I'll die laughing) list:  
celery carrots  
can of peas  
tom. paste  
potatoes;

and no one warned me that captivity  
might also lie in this: I'm  
sitting in the station house with drafts of my own poems  
hidden (how grotesque!) in my long johns,  
while five detectives with higher educations  
and even lower foreheads have the right  
to grope the entrails wrested from my life:  
tram tickets, a dry cleaning receipt, a dirty  
handkerchief and most of all that (I can't bear it) list:  
celery carrots  
can of peas  
tom. paste  
potatoes;

and no one warned me that my entire globe  
lies in the gap that parts opposing poles  
which can't be kept apart. (212-3)<sup>12</sup>

The accidental and personal take on unexpected weight in a state designed to eliminate any accident or personality that might impede history's unencumbered progress towards a radiant collective future. It is not surprising that Mandelstam should add a final, foreboding adjective to his thumbnail definition of the lyric. Poetry in the modern age is not just "accidental and personal," he warns; it is also "catastrophic." Certainly Polish poets have met with more than their share of catastrophes in the century just past. War, invasion, disease, privation, censorship, persecution, Nazi atrocities, totalitarian terror: this litany of horrors took its toll upon writer after writer (to say nothing of the legions of more prosaic victims for whom these poets struggled to speak). Notions of the poem as a well-wrought urn, as an impermeable verbal icon, could hardly withstand the battering to which modern history submitted

<sup>12</sup> William Carlos Williams, *Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 55. Baranczak, *Wybor wierszy*, 212-213.

art and artists in this part of the world. Not surprisingly, then, the poets of post-war Poland, writing from a decimated nation caught at the crossroads between two brutal regimes, focus in their own poems not only on the lyric's potential power to defy time, but just as importantly, on the vulnerability it manifests in the face of what Wat calls "Enormous History" – a vulnerability it shares, incidentally, with history's more corporeal victims.

In "Anecdote of a Jar," Wallace Stevens conquers nature by way of a jar strategically placed "upon a hill...in Tennessee":

The wilderness rose up to it,  
And sprawled around, no longer wild.  
The jar was round upon the ground  
And tall and of a port in air. (76)

The jar, an emblem of artistic form, "[takes] dominion everywhere," Stevens writes. But similar objects suffer a very different fate in Milosz's exquisite "Song on Porcelain" (1947), as translated by the author and Robert Pinsky:

Rose-colored cup and saucer,  
Flowery demitasses:  
You lie beside the river  
Where an armored column passes.  
Winds from across the meadow  
Sprinkle the banks with down;  
A torn apple tree's show  
Falls on the muddy path;  
The ground everywhere is strewn  
With bits of brittle froth—  
Of all things broken and lost  
Porcelain troubles me most.

Before the first red tones  
Begin to warm the sky  
The earth wakes up, and moans.  
It is the small sad cry  
Of cups and saucers cracking,  
The masters' precious dream  
Of roses, of mowers raking,  
And shepherds on the lawn.  
The black underground stream  
Swallows the frozen swan.  
This morning, as I walked past,  
The porcelain troubled me most.

The blackened plain spreads out  
To where the horizon blurs  
In a litter of handle and spout,  
A lively pulp that stires  
And crunches under my feet.

Pretty, useless foam:  
Your stained colors are sweet  
Spattered in dirty waves  
Flecking the fresh black loam  
In the mounds of these new graves.  
In sorrow and pain and cost,  
Sir, porcelain troubles me most. (100-3)

Stevens' jar subdues the surrounding wilderness only after it is exempted from more mundane, utilitarian purposes. By setting the jar on his mythical Tennessee hilltop, Stevens strategically removes it from the less exotic contexts in which we typically encounter such objects, on kitchen counters or grocery store shelves. But Miłosz's shattered crockery operates differently. It is moving precisely because it mediates between daily existence and the realm of art, as it demonstrates how easily both worlds fall prey to the forces of history: "You lie beside the river/ Where an armored column passes." The broken cups exemplify both the fragile forms of a vanished quotidian and the no less fragile human beings that once inhabited it: "Spattered in dirty waves/ Flecking the fresh black loam/ In the mounds of these new graves." But they also embody the "precious dreams of master craftsmen (sny majstrow drogocenne)," as the frozen swan from Mallarmé's famous sonnet "Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui" abandons the realm of pure art in order to adorn the rims of now-shattered saucers. (In the Polish text, the craftsmen's dreams take the shape of the "feathers of frozen swans" („pióra zamarłych łabędzi") that presumably adorn the porcelain). The English translation makes the original's hints of a vanished pastoral more explicit by adding "roses...mowers raking,/ And shepherds on the lawn" to the poem's litany of lost objects. It might almost be a rebuke to Keats' "unravished bride of quietness," whose pastoral scenes are preserved in perpetuity from the ravages of mere mortality.<sup>13</sup>

"Like Rembrandt, martyr of chiaroscuro,/ I've entered into numbing time" (Mandelstam 249)." So runs the opening of one of Mandelstam's cryptic late lyrics, which date from his years in internal exile in Voronezh, not long before his final arrest and death in a Stalinist camp. In Mandelstam's elliptical apostrophe to the Dutch painter, is "noble brother and master, father of the black-green dark" becomes an unexpected fellow sufferer, subject, like the Russian poet himself, to the onslaughts of "numbing" history. Mandelstam anticipates ways in which the poets of post-war Poland conceive of visual artworks – and by extension, the "verbal icons" of their own verses – in their writing. Neither paintings nor poems, they imply, are immune to the forces of history. Far from seeking solace in some airtight aesthetic refuge from reality, the poet looks rather to negotiate the shifting, permeable boundaries that divide the work of art from the larger world that both informs and, all too of-

<sup>13</sup> Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems* (New York: Vintage, 1982), 76. "Piosenka o porcelanie," in Miłosz, *Poezje wybrane: Selected Poems* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo literackie, 1996), 100-103. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems*, tr. Henry Weinfield (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

ten, imperils it: "Not many works escape the sands and fires of history," Zbigniew Herbert reminds us (101).<sup>14</sup>

The Polish poets, in other words, invariably call attention to the world that lies outside the picture's frame. Thus, Adam Zagajewski concludes his tribute to "Dutch Painters" by imagining the kind of society that fosters the untroubled domesticity their paintings celebrate.

They [the Dutch] liked dwelling. They dwelt everywhere,  
in a wooden chair back,  
in a milky streamlet narrow as the Bering Straits.  
Doors were wide open, the wind was friendly.  
Brooms rested after work well done.  
Homes bared all. The painting of a land  
without secret police

Only a "traveler from Eastern, so-called Central Europe," where concealment was until recently an unavoidable way of life, would be so quick to register the implications of this wide-open Dutch domestic space, where in art, as in reality, "apartments are put on display, illuminated in such a way that every passerby can check what's going on inside." And perhaps only such an observer, privy to the darkest spots in Europe's recent past, would be so attentive to all that this luminous art omits. "Tell us, Dutch painters," Zagajewski asks

what will happen  
when the apple is peeled, when the silk dims,  
when all the colors grow cold.  
Tell us what darkness is. (133)<sup>15</sup>

This speaker knows the powers that oppose the ordering of art and life too well to exempt even the seemingly imperturbable Dutch tableaux he loves from the onslaughts of history.

"There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism," Walter Benjamin remarks (256).<sup>16</sup> The poets of post-war Poland did not have to go far afield to test the truth of his observation. They were eyewitness to the devastation wrought on European civilization by cultured Germany and progressive Russia alike; and they saw in both the invaders and their fellow countrymen how easily the trappings of cultivation fall away from even the most seemingly civilized members of our species. Their recent past has taught them to suspect any worldview that rests upon unflinching faith in progress and a commitment to the final perfect-

<sup>14</sup> "Kak svetoteni muchenik Rembrandt," *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 249. Herbert, *Barbarian in the Garden*, tr. Michael March and Jaroslaw Anders (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 101.

<sup>15</sup> *Mysticism for Beginners*, 12, 7. Adam Zagajewski, *Another Beauty*, tr. Clare Cavanagh (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2000), 133.

<sup>16</sup> "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 256.

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ibility of human nature. “Progress in our civilization,” Herbert comments, “consists mainly in the fact that simple tools for splitting heads” are replaced by equally deadly “hatchet-words,” such as “‘mind-debaucher,’ ‘witch’ and ‘heretic’” (141). In her poem “Tortures” Szymborska casts doubt upon even this dubious achievement. “Nothing has changed,” she insists.

The body still trembles as it trembled  
before Rome was founded and after,  
in the twentieth century before and after Christ.  
Tortures are just what they were, only the earth has shrunk  
and whatever goes on sounds as if it’s just a room away. (202)

The Polish artist is the “barbarian in the garden” of European civilization, in Herbert’s phrase – and not just because of his or her backward Eastern origins. “A historical steam-roller has gone several times through [this] country whose geographical location, between Germany and Russia, is not particularly enviable,” Miłosz observes in the introduction to his anthology of *Postwar Polish Poetry* (xi-xii).<sup>17</sup> The poets of such a country are by necessity acutely aware both of a culture’s costs and of its terrible fragility.

This is the consciousness Wislawa Szymborska brings to bear on her imaginative recreation of early French art in “A Medieval Miniature.” She begins by inventing hyperbolic verbal equivalents for the extravagant elegance of paintings like those found in the *Trés Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*.

Up the verdantest of hills,  
in this most equestrian of pageants,  
wearing the silkiest of cloaks.

Towards a castle with seven towers,  
each of them by far the tallest.

In the foreground, a duke  
most flatteringly unrotund;  
by his side, his duchess  
young and fair beyond compare

Superlatives abound in the poem’s first six stanzas, which recreate the unnamed medieval miniature of the title. But a more sinister reality emerges in the poem’s final stanzas, as Szymborska turns her attention to what has been omitted from the aristocratic paradise evoked by this “feudalest of realisms.”

Whereas whosoever is downcast and weary,  
cross-eyed and out at elbows,  
is most manifestly left out of the scene.

<sup>17</sup> *Barbarian in the Garden*, 141. Szymborska, *Poems New and Collected*, 202. *Postwar Polish Poetry*, selected and edited by Czesław Miłosz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), xi-xii.



Even the least pressing of questions,  
burgherish or peasantish,  
cannot survive beneath this most azure of skies.

And not even the eaglest of eyes  
could spy even the tiniest of gallows—  
nothing casts the slightest shadow of a doubt. (156-7)<sup>18</sup>

As in Zagajewski's "Dutch Painters," Szyborska begins by sympathetically recreating life as seen from within a given worldview and aesthetic only to undermine its claims to comprehensiveness by stepping outside its seemingly sacrosanct borders. Szyborska lost her faith in the class-free utopia promised by Polish Communism early on. But in "Medieval Miniature" she apparently finds a partial truth in the Marxist vision of a history shaped by governing classes whose task is to suppress all traces of the labor that makes their dominion possible. For Szyborska, the pleasures of medieval art cannot be divorced from the price they exact. It is not only the "least pressing" of "burgherish or peasantish" questions that may not survive "beneath this most azure of skies." The "burgherish" or "peasantish" types who persist in asking such questions may find themselves dangling from the little gallows that the picture keeps carefully out of sight – or so the poem implies.

For Szyborska, though, Marxist ideology is hardly the universal master key that its twentieth-century adherents have claimed it to be. It can no more explain the miracles achieved by medieval art than the "feudalist of realisms" can do justice to the peasants and burghers who violate its aristocratic code. "Feudal realism" may be a product of a given historical moment, with all its limitations – but then of course so is its latter-day Soviet variant, socialist realism, or so Szyborska's poem hints. (And of course the Soviet state was at least as assiduous in purging class enemies as any feudal prince might be.) But the heights scaled by medieval "realism"—"each [tower] by far the tallest"—tacitly underscore the aesthetic poverty and formulaic monotony of its distant, less imaginative, descendant. Not all realisms are created equal, the poem implies.

For Szyborska and Zagajewski, the truths of art are partial in a double sense: they are both incomplete and partisan. And this is precisely what makes art human – partial truths are the only kind to which we humans are privy, these poets suggest—and what engages it in history. For only those who claim to have access to the full picture, the final point of view, can imagine themselves to be free of any merely human limits, and thus exempt themselves from history. But the lyric poet, first-person singular by definition, cannot pretend to comprehensiveness in the way that a novelist, philosopher or epic poet might. Through its commitment to the individual vision in all its particularity and partiality the lyric works to undermine precisely those versions of human history that negate the weight of individual experience by subordinating it to one Hegelian grand scheme or another. This is what I take Zagajewski to mean when he remarks that "once one divides the world into

<sup>18</sup> *Poems New and Collected*, 156-157.

history and poetry, then one obliterates the difference between a history...which is habitable and human, and the kind which produces concentration camps" (260).<sup>19</sup>

What earthly use is any icon, be it verbal or visual, that has been "arrested, framed, and taken out of the flux of history," in Cameron's phrase (101)? This is the question that activates Zbigniew Herbert's poem "Mona Lisa." "Inquisitors and troubadours" are equally at home in Herbert's essays on Western culture, in which art, society, ethics and politics form "an entangled knot of many threads": it could hardly be otherwise, it would seem, for a veteran of modern history in its unusually brutal Polish incarnation (79). But "Mona Lisa" tells a different story. The speaker is also a survivor of Poland's devastation in the war and its aftermath, as the grim landscape of the poem's opening lines reveals.

Through seven mountain frontiers  
barbed wire of rivers  
and executed forests  
and hanged bridges  
I kept coming-  
through waterfalls of stairways  
whirlings of sea wings  
and baroque heaven  
all bubbly with angels  
-to you  
Jerusalem in a frame (85-7)<sup>20</sup>

This pilgrim makes his way through this Eastern European waste land to the *sanctus sanctorum* of Western culture, to the Louvre and Leonardo's famous painting. And, as the last line suggests, the speaker's attitude towards the painting he approaches is radically different from what we find in "Dutch Painters" or "A Medieval Miniature." He does not strive to enter into an artwork of another era on its own terms; nor does he wish to engage it from his distinctive, present point of view. Instead he looks for "Jerusalem in a frame," for spiritual redemption through a pure art set apart from a recent past too terrible to contemplate. He seeks, in other works, precisely that kind of transcendent release from history that so many critics have seen as the final aim of lyric poems generally. But the painting he views from "the dense nettlepatch/ of a cook's tour/ on a shore of crimson rope/ and eyes" fails to meet his expectations. The lady he finds is not enigmatic, but mechanical, even monstrous. The landscape he passes through, with its barbed-wire rivers and executed trees, has been dehumanized through an excess of history. But Mona Lisa, the goal of his quest, is finally no less inhuman – though she has fallen prey not to history, but to what appears to be an excess of artifice:

<sup>19</sup> Zagajewski, *Two Cities: On Exile, History and the Imagination*, tr. Lillian Vallee (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1995), 260.

<sup>20</sup> Herbert, *Barbarian in the Garden*, 101; Herbert, *Still Life with a Bridle*, tr. John and Bogdana Carpenter (New York: Ecco, 1991), 79. *Selected Poems*, tr. Czesław Miłosz, Peter Dale Scott (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1968), 85-87.

laboriously smiling on  
resin-colored mute convex  
  
as if constructed out of lenses  
concave landscape for a background . . .  
  
only her regulated smile  
her head a pendulum at rest  
  
her eyes dream into infinity  
but in her glances snails are asleep

History and art as worlds kept apart are equally uninhabitable and inhuman, the poem suggests. History as brute machine is countered here by what looks to be an equally mechanical artistry, and the speaker cannot bridge the gap that divides his “living heels” from “the empty volumes” of the Mona Lisa’s flesh, that separates his specific historical experience from the static artifact before him:

between the blackness of her back  
and the first tree of my life  
  
lies a sword  
a melted precipice

These are the poem’s closing lines. But are the speaker’s final thoughts also the poet’s? The pilgrim’s description of his unsatisfactory icon suggests otherwise. Mona Lisa, he complains earlier,

has been hewed off from the meat of life  
abducted from home and history  
  
with horrifying ears of wax  
smothered with a scarf of glaze

“Hewed off,” “abducted,” “horrifying,” “smothered”: the language evokes not so much an ahistorical vacuum as the brutalized post-war Poland of the poem’s opening lines. Indeed, the phrases the speaker uses to describe the painting could just as easily be applied both to the war’s individual victims and to the fate of entire peoples and nations.

It is not just the museum setting, with its frothy angels, Cook’s tours, and crimson ropes that divides the speaker from Leonardo’s portrait. Nor is it chiefly the image itself that offends him, for all his complaints. His own desire to escape a history too harsh to be borne leads him to seek out not simply a painting, but salvation itself: “Jerusalem in a frame.” What he finds in its place looks suspiciously like the unbearable past he struggles to outrun. And one suspects finally that this horrific past, more than the painting’s purported flaws, now fills the black void that blocks him from the vanished world he mourns: how does one recover “the first tree of my life” from a wilderness of “executed forests”?

“Don’t even think about it,” the speaker warns. But Herbert’s poem reveals that there can be no thinking, no seeing, outside of history. “Mona Lisa”’s haunted speaker finds the past he flees everywhere. It haunts the tainted landscape of the opening lines, as human villains and victims are displaced onto bridges and trees; and it infects the failed sanctuary of Leonardo’s portrait, with its “fat signora” brutally hewed “from the meat of life.” “What is poetry which does not save/ Nations or peoples?” Miłosz asks in his famous poem “Dedication” (96-7).<sup>21</sup> For Herbert, Szymborska, and Zagajewski poetry is not subservient to history, as it was for their more orthodox colleagues. But neither does it exist in isolation. In “Dutch Painters,” “Mona Lisa,” and “Medieval Miniatures,” we find not celebrations of art’s iconic autonomy from time, but stories of the complex interaction between art and human time, art and human history as embodied in an individual perceiver who stands before a work from a distant era. And these stories, in turn, speak to each poet’s conception of the lyric, as in each case, a speaker rooted in a specific time and place supplements and complicates the story told by the images he or she works to recreate.

The speakers in Zagajewski’s and Szymborska’s lyrics do this consciously. They seek first to enter the artwork and the world it represents, and then to address it from what is recognizably a modern Eastern European perspective. Zagajewski and Szymborska thus offer us a model for approaching individual lyrics, a model in which we both seek to enter the poem’s world and bring our own individual context, our own rootedness in history to bear upon the work before us. Poetry that seeks to keep itself at arm’s length from merely human time is doomed to failure – or so the fate of Mallarmé’s frozen swan in the “Song on Porcelain” suggests. But the viewer – or reader – who looks to remove himself and art from history, however understandably, impoverishes both himself and art in the process; he refuses even the partial knowledge, the imperfect redemption that is all art can offer at best. One might at any rate read Herbert’s “Mona Lisa” this way; it is a cautionary tale against the mistaking of icons, be they visual or verbal, as a safe haven from history.

“Historicize, historicize,” the cultural critics cry. Yet they themselves overlook large chunks of culture and history that might complicate or challenge the limits of their own brand of historicism. Both their neglect of Eastern Europe – whose troublesome history of Marxism in practice might undermine the Marxist theory that underpins so much recent scholarship – and their distortion of lyric poetry are telling in this respect. The call to historicize carries with it an implicit condemnation of some earlier, spurious form of “pseudohistoricism” or “ahistoricism,” the crime with which the lyric in particular has been charged. But if the lyric struggles to be context-free, as such critics argue, it is because human beings likewise try, time and again, to rise above the contexts that confine them: Keat’s Grecian urn yields its secrets, if indeed it does, only in response to the insistent questioning of the poem’s mortal speaker to whom its glimpses of transcendence remain forever out of reach. All efforts to step outside time, the lyric reminds us, are doomed to fail in advance, which is why the lyric poet must struggle time and again to achieve the “revenge of

<sup>21</sup> “Przedmowa,” *Poezje wybrane: Selected Poems*, 96-97.

a mortal hand,” the temporary reprieve from mortality that is all we can hope for at best (Szyborska 68).<sup>22</sup>

Herbert’s speaker in “Mona Lisa” goes in quest of a timeless icon that will release him, if only temporarily, from history’s shackles; what he finds is inevitably distorted by the history he tries to leave behind. Attempts to read the lyric as the antithesis to legitimate, historically engaged writing –whatever that might be – likewise tell us at least as much about the genre’s interrogators as they do about the mode of writing such critics claim to illuminate. The lyric is, as I’ve been arguing, a genre of limits – but as its Polish practitioners reveal, its limitations are self-conscious and self-critical. This heightened self-consciousness, moreover, is itself a response to a specific historical situation, in which Poland’s foreign-backed rulers claimed to have uncovered a historical master key, a Metahistory or Megahistory that rendered all earlier versions obsolete. The “new” in “New Historicism” inevitably calls to mind the language of advertising, where the adjective “new” is invariably paired with its Madison Avenue twin, “improved.” The very idea of a “New Historicism” rests on the notions of intellectual progress and superior vision, if not outright omniscience, that its adherents claim to reject. They would do well to learn from the spurned lyric, which, particularly in its postwar Polish incarnation, teaches us to test the limits not just of the thing perceived, but of its all-too-human perceiver.

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<sup>22</sup> Szyborska, *Poems New and Collected*, 68.

## Arent van NIEUKERKEN

### Czesław Miłosz and the Tradition of European Romanticism

#### I.

The starting point of Czesław Miłosz's poetical development shows him as the heir of one of the main lines of Romantic poetry. When embarking on his literary career as a member of the poetical group "Żagary" (the so-called Wilno "catastrophists"), he owed much to two literary currents rooted in Romanticism that – together with the modernized classicism of the Cracow Avant-garde and the hybrid poetics of "Skamander" – shaped the poetical scenery of the interwar period. I am, of course, thinking of Surrealism and also of Symbolism that, in the person of Paul Valéry, remained in the thirties an important point of reference. Both these currents derive more or less immediately from the hermetic, "somnambulist" line of Romantic poetry that is usually associated with names like Novalis, Gérard de Nerval, Lautréamont etc..

The atmosphere of this literary model also pervades Miłosz' collection of poems *Three Winters* (*Trzy zimy*), particularly with respect to the status of the poetical subject that appears to act under the pressure of demonic forces. However, the influence of this brand of Romanticism on Miłosz turned out to be short-lived. During the last years of the Second World War, and in the first post-war years, he revised his poetics completely, taking advantage of Anglo-Saxon modernism with its concept of an impersonal authorial instance as the basis of a polyphony of voices. Simultaneously, Miłosz revived certain eighteenth-century (Enlightenment) genres. For that reason it could be maintained that his post-war poems testify to a genuine anti-Romantic turn. In the period initiated by his *Treatise on Poetry* (*Traktat poetycki*), Miłosz's poetics underwent a further transformation that consisted of the rediscovery of the

authorial instance as a distinct self without, however, giving up the polyphony (or “multi-voicedness” (Bakhtin)) that marked his previous period of development (an exemplary embodiment of this poetical strategy were *The Songs of Poor People* (*Głosy biednych ludzi*)). The first fully realized specimens of this new period are the long poems *A Chronicle of the Town Pornic* (*Kroniki miasteczka Pornic*) and *Throughout Our Lands* (*Po ziemi naszej*).

At this point, I would like to put forward the following thesis: the difference between the “catastrophist” poetry of the young Miłosz and his poetical oeuvre starting from the sixties was not merely due to the discovery of T.S. Eliot and other Anglo-Saxon modernists. It was not less indebted (perhaps not in the sense of an overt poetical model, but rather as a point of reference) to an alternative romantic current, opposed to the hermetic line of Novalis and Nerval that was later adopted by the Symbolists. This alternative brand of Romanticism attempted to create a poetics that (as previously with Classicism) mirrored the metaphysical order of being. In other words: it proposed an integral interpretation of man’s *being-in-the-world* by creating an existential autobiography that went far beyond the somnambulist, “lunar” aspects of existence. The founding fathers of this Romantic line were – by definition – “major poets”. To our mind come immediately two names: Goethe (after overcoming his period of “*Sturm und Drang*”) and William Wordsworth. It is important, at this point, to stress that what I propose is an intertextual investigation from the point of view of a *general* typology of Romanticism, and not an attempt to unearth direct influences of the abovementioned poets on Miłosz. I use their poetics rather as a heuristic category, in order to specify the existential structure by which the later poetry of Poland’s greatest twentieth century poet has been shaped. From the point of view of intertextuality, in a narrower sense, this structure is mainly (but not exclusively) dependent on the particular circumstances of the Polish literary tradition (Adam Mickiewicz, the author of *Pan Tadeusz*, as the chief Polish exponent of non-hermetic Romanticism). What I – from the point of view of a general typology – essentially assert is that the underlying poetical structure through which these major Romantic poets express a specific totality of (self)-experience<sup>1</sup> recalls the structure of Miłosz’s mature poetry, particularly with regard to the relationship between the authorial instance (speaker) and the voices on the level of the represented world. This similarity is to a certain extent obscured by the fact that Miłosz employs poetical devices typical for the modernist (long) poem, e.g. the technique of *collage*.

The tension between two types of Romanticism (the “autobiographical” as opposed to the “lunar” one) at various stages of Miłosz’s poetic development essentially boils down to different models of personality. Let us, in order to clarify this opposition, examine the status of the poetical subject in Miłosz’s already mentioned book of poems *Three Winters*. The major Polish critic Jan Błoński has pointed out that in

<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that hermetic or theosophical concepts do not occur in oeuvre of these poets, but their presence is always subjected to the larger structure of the existential autobiography.

the poem “Slow River” („Powolna rzeka”) the identity of the speaker is unclear<sup>2</sup>. An attentive reading of other poems written during these years shows that it is in fact the second person singular that makes its presence emphatically felt. Furthermore, we are faced both with the first person singular (often implicitly marked) and the first person plural. A more profound analysis usually shows that the second person is either an *alter ego* of the “I” (as has been pointed out by Michał Głowiński in his interpretation of the poem “Roki”<sup>3</sup>), or the (often rather roughly treated) addressee of the rhetorical stance adopted by a socially committed poet (c.f. the second part of the *Poem about Frozen Time* (*Poemat o czasie zastygłym*)). It is not easy to work out clear-cut distinctions, but it could be generally maintained that the first person plural attempts to define its place towards époques and civilizations. The “I,” on the other hand, describes itself by gradually emerging from the multi-voiced pressure of something that does away with ordinary historical time and that, because of its demonic or atavistic shape, cannot be conceived of as belonging to the realm of civilization. To put it succinctly, the “I” describes itself by facing an *energy*. An excellent example of such a form of selfhood is the poetical subject in the poem “Hymn”: “There is no-one between you and me,/ and to me strength is given” (13).<sup>4</sup> (°).

Miłosz’s catastrophist poetry appears to be problematical, because it is impossible to reconcile the public realm (poetry towards history) with the sphere of the profound self. History cannot become an integral part of its poetical autobiography determined by demonic somnambulism. The profound self lacks, in its turn, the force to disentangle itself from demonism and grasp the mechanisms of history, since that would demand finding an “objective correlative” (T.S. Eliot) for the somnambulist attitude towards the world. This could only be achieved by developing a structure that represents the distance between the somnambulist self (“I”) and the self (“I” as belonging to a “we”) that takes part in inter-generational communication. However, in the course of this process the profound self would betray its very nature. Miłosz had already become aware in the late-thirties of this rift between “I” and “we” in his poetry, a few years before he discovered Anglo-Saxon modernism. His “Dithyramb”, written in 1937, seems to be an expression of his wrestling with the inner tension by which the subject of his catastrophist poetry was almost torn apart. However, the lyrical subject of the “Dithyramb” is – unlike the “I” in *Three Winters* – capable of some self-reflection. It tries to distinguish itself from the “I” immersed in the multi-voicedness of being, and to work out the conditions of a consciously autobiographical poetry that would do justice to both the demonic and historical realm (even though it speaks out in the first person plural, as the spokesman of a generation). The new

<sup>2</sup> J. Błoński, *Miłosz jak świat*, Kraków 1989, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Cz. Miłosz, *Trzy zimy – głosy o wierszach*, Londyn 1987, p. 132.

<sup>4</sup> Quotations of Miłosz’s poetry in English come from: Czesław Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems 1931-2001*, New York 2005 (NCP). Unmarked quotations have been translated by the author of the present essay.

<sup>5</sup> “Nikogo nie ma między tobą I mną,/ a mnie jest dana siła” (W t. 1, p. 73). Quotations of Miłosz’s poetry in Polish come from: Czesław Miłosz, *Wiersze* (pięć tomów), Znak, Kraków 2001-2009. (W).



generation of (young) poets attempts, on the one hand, to express in “pure words” what is elemental and unique (unrepeatable): “the morning rocking of the sea... the first glimmer of the day.”<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, it does not omit “the suffering – we are woven up/ with their harm, and from our shoulders flows a royal mantle,/ lined with the blood of curses, the laments of the oppressed”<sup>7</sup>. These contradictory points of view are reconciled by “splendidly roaming” („wędrowkę wspaniałą”), or, in other words: we must embark upon a Quest. It does not suffice to wait passively for “beauty that should be visible/ and easy even to a child”<sup>8</sup>. However, this beauty, “this new order of regenerated forms that eagerly express the truth”<sup>9</sup>, is also a gift that “arrives silently” („nadchodzi cicho”). The relationship between history and the realm of (not necessarily Christian) grace pertains to a paradox, and this paradox is formulated in a (quasi) discursive manner.

Thus, the “Dithyramb” appears to be a first sketch of the poetical project presented by the mature Miłosz in which the author by the very process of creating his autobiography incorporates himself into a continuously widening world that is revealed by epiphanies. However, unlike the situation in Miłosz’s later oeuvre, the “Dithyramb” fails to proceed from adequately stating this project towards its embodiment, or rather it embodies it only partially by focusing on the epiphany that interrupts and suspends the subject’s normal way of temporal being-in-the-world. After achieving this it becomes, from an ontological point of view, clear that the realization of this moment has not been accomplished by the subject that experiences it directly. At best, a different, “general” subject can assert that what has “happened” to the original subject is, in fact, an “event”. A necessary (even though not sufficient) condition of recognizing an epiphany as an event happening to “me” is that the “I” creates a poetical space in which it can simultaneously represent itself as the subject of epiphany and incorporate (which means to a certain extent objectifying it) this event in the larger context of “my” existential autobiography. The visionary is a gift. Creating an autobiography: a task that the subject sets itself. In the case of Miłosz, this awareness turns out to be a moral imperative. As such it affects “all of us”: we proceed from the first person singular to the first person plural, uniting in a community. The “Dithyramb” fails to accomplish this task. The poet stands on the threshold of maturity, but lacks the ability (or insight) to cross it. I have already pointed out that Miłosz crossed this threshold much later, around 1960, in *A Chronicle of the Town Pornic* and the long poem *Throughout Our Lands*. However, before analyzing these texts in greater detail, I will start by presenting a famous nineteenth-century example of a poetical autobiography, and subsequently, attempt to explain why more than twenty years

<sup>6</sup> “poranne kołysanie mórz [...] pierwszy blask dnia” [W t. 1, p. 121].

<sup>7</sup> “o tych, co cierpią – w węzeł gordyjski jesteśmy spleceni/ z krzywdą, a z pleców spływa nam królewski płaszcz,/ podbity krwią złorzeczeń, skargą uciśnionych” [W t. 1, p. 122].

<sup>8</sup> “piękność, co powinna być widzialna/ I łatwa nawet dziecku” [W t. 1, p. 122].

<sup>9</sup> “ten nowy ład form odrodzonych, wyrażających chciwie prawdę” [W t. 1, p. 122]

passed between Miłosz's sketching the project of an existential autobiography and his first attempts at realizing it.

### 2.

The archetype of a realized poetical autobiography appears to be Wordsworth's famous poem about the "growth of a poet's mind": *The Prelude*. An essential part of this long poem are the events from his childhood and youth that, as far as the metaphysical impact of these anecdotes is concerned, recall Miłosz's poetry and prose of remembrance. A good example of an event with a "metaphysical" bearing is an episode in which Wordsworth describes how, still a child, he "plundered" a raven's nest:

Nor less when spring had warmed the cultured Vale,  
Roved we as plunderers where the mother-bird  
Had in high places built her lodge; though mean  
Our object and inglorious, yet the end  
Was not ignoble...  
oh, at that time  
While on the perilous ridge I hung alone,  
With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind  
Blow through my ears! The sky seemed not a sky  
Of earth – and with what motion moved the clouds! (498-9)

Due to the miraculous power of memory, this event plays an important role in the autobiography of a growing mind. It acquires moral significance, being one of the many stages that prepare the protagonist for experiencing in the final episode of *The Prelude*, when he climbs Mount Snowdon, the epiphany of the "Spirit of the Universe". Wordsworth explicitly attributes the educational significance of this episode to the "immortal spirit" that is to be equated with Nature as a dynamic, growing organism (instead of a primordial, "given" state):

Dust as we are, the immortal spirit grows  
Like harmony in music; there is a dark  
Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles  
Discordant elements, makes them cling together  
In one society...  
Thanks to the means which Nature deigned to employ;  
Whether her fearless visitings, or those  
That came with soft alarm, like hurtless light  
Opening the peaceful clouds; or she may use  
Severer interventions, ministry  
More palpable, as best might suit her aim. (Wordsworth 499)

Not less important for the autobiography of the protagonist is (a further parallel with Miłosz) his role as a witness to, and active participant of, history. Wordsworth stayed during the first years of the Revolution in France, and in *The Prelude* he attempted to recapture the messianic hopes of this period. However, the memory of

these hopes is counterpoised by the author's later disenchantment that introduces a certain discontinuity to the temporal structure of the poem. Without this rupture it would be impossible to represent the process of time stratifying itself, due to which the poetical subject acquires distance not only to its former self, but also to its present self "here and now", during the very moment of writing. This stratification of the self is a precondition of epiphany as an experience suspending the temporality of everyday life.

Similarly stratified – i.e. centering around ordinary experiences – related in the form of anecdotes, is the poetical world of Miłosz. Jan Błoński has pointed out that "the poetry of Miłosz is essentially anecdotic and autobiographical, referring continuously to personal or individual experiences, particularly reading and travelling, which entails the necessity of comment rather than taking recourse to stylization and historical costume."<sup>10</sup> It would be even more accurate to say that the poetics of anecdote and stylization are often juxtaposed, and that the tendency of Miłosz's poetry of making the "I" dress up in various costumes (from the Renaissance, the Baroque, the Enlightenment, Romanticism) that demand of him to play some role, determines the specific brand of his autobiographism. The confessional self is only one of these roles, apart from a number of others, such as the ecstatic and the public self.<sup>11</sup>

### 3.

Let us now try to answer the second question. We have already seen that the postulate of an existential autobiography, a project that, as a matter of fact, seemed to be completely in tune with Miłosz's essentially Romantic worldview, was already put forward in the "Dithyramb" (1937). Keeping this in mind, how can it be explained that it took twenty years before the poet started to realize this project? Furthermore, why was the act of stating its necessity almost immediately followed by Miłosz's anti-romantic turn that made him consciously renounce his intention of integrating the profound self with the self as the witness of a certain generation, in favor of a impersonality typical for the Eliotic brand of modernism? This development seems less startling (I consciously center on the immanent dynamics of literature, leaving aside – not without a certain moral uneasiness – the impact of the horror caused by the destruction of whole nations and societies), when we compare it with the evolution undergone by another poet who, just like Miłosz, attempted to reconcile the Romantic concept of the poetical subject with the postulate of impersonality, put forward by the Anglo-Saxon modernists. The self in Yeats's poetry is, as an energy, infinite. However, its poetic objectivizations cannot be but finite, fragmentary. Becoming aware of this apparently inevitable one-sidedness and attempting to achieve

<sup>10</sup> Błoński, *Miłosz jak świat*, p. 59.

<sup>11</sup> Or, in other words: the speaker of Miłosz's confessional poetry is essentially a *persona* among other "masks," each of which contributes some element to "the sum of Miłosz's experience of life" (Błoński, *Miłosz jak świat*, p. 93).

wholeness, the self reaches out to its opposite (interestingly, the anthropology of the author of the theosophical treatise *A Vision* bases on the tension between *self* and *anti-self*). In order to find a complement for the emotional impressionism of his early poetry, the middle Yeats created a “cold” poetical subject, shunning confession, fond of a mentoring attitude (what I have in mind are his poetry collections *Responsibilities* and *The Wild Swans at Coole*, and particularly the famous cycle *The Tower*, that Miłosz himself – perhaps not accidentally – translated into Polish). The poems of this period are also characterized by objective descriptions of the external world, not unlike some of Miłosz’s poems written during the Second World War (e.g. “Journey” („Podróż”) and “The River” („Rzeka”). This analogy is, of course, incomplete. In fact, the strategy of reaching out to one’s opposite seems to be characteristic of all great poetry. The very greatness of poets consists in their ability to cope with continuous change, and these metamorphoses leave an imprint on their poetics. What is decisive in the case of Miłosz and Yeats appears, however, seems to be something else: the impersonality of their poetry, and its classicist stance, is not a simple antithesis but must be related to their oeuvre as a dynamically developing whole. We will shortly see that Miłosz’s turning in the sixties towards the existential autobiography has been mediated by his modernism. Yet, from a slightly different angle it could equally be maintained that Miłosz’s modernism had been previously mediated by the Romanticism (in the sense of a general typology opposing “romantic” to “classicist” poetics, and not a specific epoch in literary history) that pervaded the sketch of an existential autobiography presented in the poem “Dithyramb”.

The modernist mediatization explains why Miłosz started to take interest in larger poetical forms. However, it soon became clear that the Eliotian genres, particularly the type of a polyphonic long poem represented by *The Waste Land* and the cyclical set of variations linking metaphysical meditation to musical structures (*Four Quartets*), failed to satisfy a self that, participating in history, attempted to find its unique and unrepeatable destiny by multiplying perspectives in accordance with the inner metamorphoses it had undergone. In *The Waste Land* the “I” (Tiresias) merely registers events and moods to which it passively surrenders. The poetical subject of *Four Quartets* assesses everything from an ideal point of view, beyond space and time<sup>12</sup>. We have already seen that during his catastrophist period Miłosz

<sup>12</sup> C.f. the following passages from *Four Quartets*: “the point of intersection of the timeless/ With time” (T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, London 1990, p. 212 – *Dry Salvages*) and “Only through time time is conquered” (ibid., p. 192, *Burnt Norton*). Miłosz is not preoccupied with overcoming (“conquering”) time, but with redeeming it. In his *Treatise on Poetry* he revises Eliot’s concept of abolishing time by somewhat modifying a statement from *Little Gidding*: “Here is the unattainable/ Truth of being, here at the edge of lasting/ and not lasting. Where the parallel lines intersect,/ Time lifted above time by time” ( 143] („Tu niedosiężalna/ Prawda istoty, tutaj na krawędzi/ Trwania, nietrwania. Dwie linie przecięte./ Czas wyniesione ponad czas przez czas” [W t. 2, p. 236-237]). The difference with Eliot seems slight, but it is essential: „Here, the intersection of the *timeless* moment/ Is England and nowhere. Never and Always” (Eliot, *Collected Poems...*, p. 215, italics A.v.N.)

had not succeeded in connecting the visions of the somnambulist self with a sense of belonging to a distinct generation committed to the *praxis* of history. Eliot's discoveries in the field of poetical genres did not do anything to remedy this situation. Therefore, Miłosz was forced to choose a different path, following the example of poets like W.H. Auden and Carl Shapiro, and create a modern counterpart for the eighteenth century poetical treatise. This genre always specifies its speaker and addressee. The rules of communication between them are in principle clearly defined. There is no room for the ambiguity and self-concealment that so often occur in Miłosz's catastrophist poetry. Moreover, the author of a treatise is fully aware of his role as a spokesman of a certain community (a generation, class or nation) and understands the mechanisms by which it is ruled. His very task consists in analyzing these mechanisms and explaining them to the group of which he is both spokesman and teacher. For that reason his way of belonging to (and participating in) the group presupposes a certain distance, not only to it, but also to himself as a member of this community. It seems that the poetics of the treatise allowed Miłosz taking a great step forward, both with regard to the model of socially committed poetry (*The Poem about the Frozen River*) and the somnambulist phantasmagorias of *Three Winters*.

Yet, it cannot be overlooked that he had to pay a high price. The self of the poetical treatise is, in fact, even more one-dimensional than the somnambulist "I". It does not cross lands and continents searching for fresh experiences, nor does it feel itself "knit up in a Gordian knot with wrongs" ("Dythyramb"), but limits itself to describing, presenting causes and effects, passing assessment etc., in other words: it engages into something that had been hitherto absent from Miłosz's poetry. However, it fails to accomplish this in the context of an existential autobiography. The (Enlightenment) generality of Miłosz's treatise project was from the very beginning undermined by irony, which is hardly surprising in the case of a poet who always tried to uphold the existence of the particular and the sensual in face of the universal and the abstract. Because of this inner tension, the poetry of the treatise that achieved its zenith in the *Treatise on Morals* began in the fifties to gradually dissolve. Miłosz's major work of this period, the *Treatise on Poetry*, belongs, in fact, only partially to this genre understood in the above-mentioned sense, and refers on a different level to the dichotomy characteristic for his pre-war poetry.

In the first, "historical" parts of the *Treatise on Poetry* dominates the perspective of generational community. Behind the first person plural appears (unlike the "we" of Miłosz's catastrophist poetry) the self of a teacher who does not in the first place express solidarity with his generation nor calls on it to undertake joint action, but rather attempts to transmit the knowledge necessary to distinguish between what is valuable or not, authentic or inauthentic, in short: the difference between good and evil. This mentoring subject shuns all remarks or comments referring to its own history and, when it cannot avoid to make its personality felt, accomplishes this necessity discretely, employing – being a representative of the younger generation – the third person plural: "That's why it was that the new generation/ Liked these poets (the Skamandrites) only moderately./ Paid them tribute, but with a certain

anger...Nor did Broniewski win their admiration" (120).<sup>13</sup> This "didactic" perspective begins to change in the third part – "The Spirit of History" – that, even though grammatical indicators of personality rarely occur, appears to be with regard to expressions of despondency and anger much more permeated by personality than the parts about the *Belle Époque* and the two decennia between the two world wars. The first person plural ("we") gradually transforms itself into the third person plural ("they"): "The survivors ran through fields, escaping/ From themselves (..) Till the end of their days all of them/ Carried the memory of their cowardice,/ For they didn't want to die without a reason" (132).<sup>14</sup> The speaker once was one of them, but at the moment he has acquired a certain distance that is emphatically presented by the tension between the first and third person plural<sup>15</sup>.

The real turning-point occurs, however, in the last part of the poem, not accidentally entitled "Nature." Temporal motion recedes in view of a space that widens ever more. At first, it seems that each creature, facing nature as something alien and devoid of compassion, remains alone: "Impaled on the nail of a blackthorn, a grasshopper/ Leaks brown fluid from its twitching snout,/ Unaware of torture and law" (140).<sup>16</sup> The sole legitimate perspective turns out to be the first person singular. The author suddenly speaks from the perspective of his singleness. He moves in a rowing boat through the heart of the American continent ("To keep the oars from squeaking in their locks/ He binds them with a handkerchief. The dark/ has rushed east from the Rocky Mountains/ And settled in the forests of the continent" (141)).<sup>17</sup> For Miłosz, America has always been associated with ahistoricity and ecstatically experiencing the otherness of nature. Such an America is completely alien to Europe, governed by "the spirit of history". Therefore we might get the impression that the *Treatise on Poetry* is as a record of personality equally incoherent (and in a similar way) as was Miłosz's pre-war poetry. The self of history and the self that experiences nature in its immediateness still remain apart. Nevertheless, from a different point view, it seems that Miłosz had made essential progress since the publication of *Three Winters* and the "Dithyramb". The self in the fourth part of the *Treatise*, notwithstanding its immersion in nature, turns out to be much more intimately

<sup>13</sup> "Oto dlaczego młode pokolenie/ Tamtych poetów polubiło w miarę,/ Hołd im oddając, ale nie bez gniewu. [...] Broniewski też nie znalazł u nich łaski" [W, t. 2, p. 196].

<sup>14</sup> "Polami wtedy żywi uciekali/ Od samych siebie [...]. Każdy z nich dźwigał do końca dni swoich tchórzostwa, bo umrzeć bez celu/ Nie chciał" [W t. 2, p. 219-220].

<sup>15</sup> This tension explains the quotation marks of the prayer to "King of the centuries, ungraspable movement" [NCP< p. 132] („Królu stuleci, nieobjęty Ruchu" [W t. 2, p. 221]), in which "we" ask to be redeemed from ignorance, and that "our devotion" may be "accepted" (132) („Zbaw od niewiedzy, uznaj naszą wierność" [W t. 2, p. 221]).

<sup>16</sup> "Na gwóźdź tarniny wbity konik polny,/ Ani tortury świadomy, ni prawa" [W t. 2, p. 232].

<sup>17</sup> "Ażeby wiosła w dulkach nie skrzypiały,/ Związałem chustkę. Ciemność podchodziła/ Od gór skalistych, Nebraski, Nevady,/ Zgarniając w siebie lasy kontynentu" [W t. 2, p. 233].

connected with the past as a real presence, remembered and experienced, than the teacher and spokesman of his generation in the first three parts who seems to derive in straight line from the speaker in a well-known poem published in *Three Winters* ("We lived in strange and hostile times"),<sup>18</sup> and whose stance has only slightly been modified by the descriptive objectivism of Anglo-Saxon modernism. The "I" in the garden of nature recalls "everything" and succeeds in representing (in the literal sense of "again-making-present") the most tangible details from the past: "that wedding in Basel/ A touch to the strings of the viola and fruits/ In silver bowls" (142).<sup>19</sup> Nearby he hears "the splash of a beaver in the American night" but, at the same moment "the memory grows larger than my life" (143).<sup>20</sup> The protagonist starts to consciously write his existential autobiography in which the past becomes an essential element of the present. This is, in fact, an apocalyptic experience. Due to it, he has, being conveyed to a dimension beyond the limits of the first person singular, a foretaste of the simultaneousness (in other words: fullness) of time. The space of epiphany opens up.

#### 4.

It could be argued that the *Treatise on Poetry*, notwithstanding its artistic importance, is a masterpiece that does not resolve all inner tensions. Nevertheless, the poem is an important link in Miłosz's project of working out a "more comprehensive form" (a circumstance that, from an existential perspective, would appear to justify its being flawed). Furthermore, it is obvious that not the poetics of the poetical treatise shaping the first two parts of the poem, but the shift of perspective to an existential autobiography in its last (fourth) part were decisive for the evolution of Miłosz's poetry. Its basis is the creative energy of memory, due to which time loses its opacity and reveals a specific architecture. Past and present intertwine through the act of representing the individual and distinct experiences of the self, often by means of, at first sight trivial, anecdotes. Miłosz's adopting of anecdotes as a constructive principle in his later poetry recalls a similar tendency in the type of Romanticism of which Wordsworth was the acknowledged master, and that derived from the same concept of time as a function of the creative power of memory. The poem on the "growth of a poet's mind" focuses (here I paraphrase the remarks of Thomas Vogler in his book *Preludes to a Vision*) not only on the remembered objects and scenes from nature in itself, but also aims to represent the way of remembering and experiencing those objects and scenes as features of certain general, or at least more comprehensive patterns that connect image with image, scene with scene<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> "W czasach dziwnych i wrogich żyliśmy [...]" [W t. 1, p. 79].

<sup>19</sup> "ten ślub w Bazylei./ Dotknięta struna wioli i owoce/ W misach ze srebra"  
[W t. 2, p. 235].

<sup>20</sup> "Płuśnięcie bobra w noc amerykańską/ I pamięć większa niż jest moje życie"  
[W t. 2, p. 236].

<sup>21</sup> Th. A. Vogler, *Preludes to a Vision – The Epic Venture in Blake, Wordsworth, Keats and Hart Crane*, Berkeley, 1971.



In both cases poetry aims for a specific wholeness of experience in which the perceiver, that which he perceives and the act of perception preserve their distinctness. This unity in difference presupposes the experience of the moment as a “vessel” of stratified time. The moment passes by but since the subject, whilst experiencing it, recalls simultaneously with its passing one (or more) moments of the past, this passing moment – present “here and now” – does not fall into oblivion. It has been preserved and therefore it will be once recalled, and in it shall also be recalled all other moments that have passed by and that are contained in it (not as a “passive” content, but as an energy, in accordance with the mental laws of association). Typical for Wordsworth’s poetry is the memory as an immediate communion between an “I” (or “you”) and nature against the background of places in which man is stripped of his humanity and condemned to loneliness, as in the sordid towns of the Industrial Revolution. It turns out that the act of remembering a previous life in the womb of nature always produces a salutary effect (the healing power of memory is, as a matter of fact, also the core experience in Mickiewicz’s epic *Pan Tadeusz*, and becomes in the epilogue to the poem even the subject of authorial self-reflection).

Yet, it seems that Miłosz attributed an even greater power to acts of remembrance than Wordsworth, as is proved by the long poems *A Chronicle of the Town Pornic* and *Throughout Our Lands*. These texts showed for the first time the full artistic potential of the existential autobiography. Let us first examine Miłosz’s *Chronicle*. Everything that in Miłosz’s *Treatises* had been presented as either general or deriving from a sense of belonging to a generation has now become particular and, as such, it pivots on historical events or rather anecdotes that the author not merely relates, but also shows as being in some way or other connected with his autobiography. The first autobiographical element in this poem is, of course, the presence of the author in the French coastal town which is expressed by him either directly (“Next to the port I pass the narrow street of Galipaud”),<sup>22</sup> or obliquely with descriptions that are suffused with subjectivity. Often both perspectives are combined (“Under the drizzle that soaked in the mowed lawns,/ Row after row, either Christian and family name, regiment,/ Or only succinctly: ‘a soldier, known to God’/ I read: ‘17 September 1940’”).<sup>23</sup> The past of the town of Pornic turns into presence when confronted with the presence “here and now” of the author. Even the first part of the poem, “The Castle of Bluebeard”, devoted to the notorious “Gilles de Laval, Baron de Retz”, that might seem a catalogue of irrelevant entries, turns out to be permeated by the private particular of the author: “The arrow of a crossbow/ Could reach mast of any ship entering the port at high tide when the flood rises...Because his cutlass missed the tough heart of the boar” (171).<sup>24</sup> The feats and crimes of Gilles

<sup>22</sup> “Koło portu przechodzę uliczką Galipaud” [W t. 2, p. 301].

<sup>23</sup> “Pod drobnym deszczem, który wsiąkał w strzyżone trawniki,/ Rząd za rzędem, czy imię, nazwisko i pułk,/ Czy tylko krótko: ‘Żołnierz, znany Bogu’/ Czytałem: ‘17 czerwca 1940’” [W t. 2, p. 306].

<sup>24</sup> “Masztów każdej łodzi/ Zmierzającej do portu w czas przyływu/ Dośćgnąć można strzałem z kuszy, [...]. Bo kordelas nie trafił w mocne serce dzika” [W t. 2, p. 300].



de Retz do not in any way relate to the author's autobiography. It is not he who is speaking. He is merely repeating other people's (chronicler's) tales. But his inability to understand the supposed cruelty of Joan of Arc's one time companion represents in a larger sense the individual man's impotence towards history

Things change in the next parts of the *Chronicle*. The events from history gradually intertwine with the existential autobiography of the author who is a refugee, an émigré from a land devastated by historical disasters, revolutions, incursions and even civil war. Against this background we understand why he feels obliged to preserve the memory of the parson Galipaud who "failed to be a patriot", although even his political opponents considered him a good man: "In this reveals itself the contradiction between the particular and the general/ Because he was even liked by those who dance the carmagnole."<sup>25</sup> Galipaud is particularly close to the author since he was forced him to flee because of a ideology professing to be universal, and his fate could easily have become that of the author ("Galipaud died in exile in San Sebastian, longing").<sup>26</sup> The poems "Heirs" and "Vandean" could be interpreted in the same context. The link between the historical figures from Pornic and the author is shown from a different angle in the poem "Our Lady of salvation". Each of us stands in need of salvation, including ordinary people. How can we explain that some of us perish and others, although with lesser merit, are saved (this is, in fact, a recurring theme in Miłosz's later poetry)? We must be content with putting forward the question, after which we simply go on with our life ("Later they drank, grew boisterous, their women conceived" (174)).<sup>27</sup>

In the following parts of the poem the connection between the events that took place in the town Pornic and the author's existential autobiography becomes even more intimate. Polish issues make their appearance. It turns out that Słowacki's mystical philosophy of the "Genesis of the spirit" (the author is appalled by it) has been conceived on this very spot. Słowacki walked being, just like the author himself, a lonely exile, here where "heather and juniper grew,/ And little sheep grazed next to druidic stones./ Notaries and merchants have built villas"<sup>28</sup>. The contrast between the metaphysical concepts created by the fertile imagination of the romantic poet and ordinary life that has been reinstated in its right arouses in the author a mood of reverie, but the very fact of his being conscious of these quasi-religious illusions appears to be an indirect affirmation of Słowacki's presence (the speaker actually quotes a distich from his mystical drama *Samuel Zborowski*). The protagonist's polemical intentions do not matter. Słowacki's presence remains an inalienable element of the Polish tradition that he carries with him, due to his being an exile. Tradition does not merely establish a link with his countrymen, but shapes his very perception of reality.

<sup>25</sup> "Okazuje się tutaj sprzeczność pomiędzy poszczególnym i ogólnym,/ Bo kochali go ci nawet, co tańczyli karmaniołę" [W t. 2, p. 301].

<sup>26</sup> "Galipaud umarł na wygnaniu, w San Sebastian, tęskniąc" [W t. 2, p. 301].

<sup>27</sup> "Potem pili, wrzeszczeli, kobiety poczywały" [W t. 2, p. 304].

<sup>28</sup> "Kiedy spacerowałeś tutaj, był wrzos i żarnowiec,/ Małe czarne owce pasły się koło druidycznych głazów,/ Notariusze i kupcy pobudowali wille" [W t. 2, p. 304-305].

The multi-voicedness culminates in the poem “British War Cemetery” (singled out by Jan Błoński in his seminal essay “Miłosz like the Earth”),<sup>29</sup> where all hitherto mentioned themes and motives concur and intertwine. On this cemetery rest seventeen victims of the passenger ship “Lancastria” that had been sunk on the 17<sup>th</sup> of June as the result of an airstrike by German planes. The author recalls “that day in Vilnius, on the Cathedral Square.”<sup>30</sup> Among the buried is also Captain Henryk Makowski from Kruszwica, a parachutist that had been captured during some secret mission. The speaker learns about this from the local guardian of the cemetery. He imagines that this Pole, being of one age with him at the moment of his death (thirty), went to a lyceum where he heard without any enthusiasm how “The teacher of Polish/ With decorum declaimed the beginning of (Słowacki’s) *Genesis of the Spirit*”<sup>31</sup>. He certainly never expected to be laid to eternal rest in the very place where this prose poem about the chain of lives had been composed, becoming a “part of this very scenery”. He also did not expect that his girlfriend Muriel Tamar Byck (“Womens’s Auxiliary Air Force”) would be buried on this same cemetery, she who, when he, still a schoolboy, heard Słowacki’s sublime words, frolicked across London (the author did not learn about their friendship from some anonymous chronicle as in the case of Gilles de Retz, but owed this information to the already mentioned guardian Mr. Richard). Could anyone have expected that Muriel would become his “lifelong and deathlong friend?”<sup>32</sup> And why was it Makowski who perished, and not the author himself (c.f. “Our Lady of Salvation”)?: We can, however, conceive of a still greater miracle, in other words: due to the creative power of memory, all these different threads concur in a poem constituting an essential link in the chain of the author’s existential biography. We are, in fact, witnessing the experience of *apokatastasis* (that, as a conscious metaphysical concept, makes its appearance in Miłosz’s poetical “summa” *From the Rising of the Sun*, published in the seventies). The very circumstance that so many layers of time can co-exist in the literary representation of one moment justifies the intuition that the author’s existential autobiography participates in a more comprehensive whole. The entire poem gives, in fact, a personal account of a life that – as Miłosz already announced in the “Dithyramb” – is tied “in a Gordian knot” with the “harm” of other people, being in their otherness similar to him.

## 5.

The *Chronicle of Pornic* presents an existential autobiography as a sequence of loosely connected fragments. Miłosz’s poem has (not unlike Eliot’s *Waste Land*) been “put together” from chunks of “real” life that derive from different times. The

<sup>29</sup> J. Błoński, *Miłosz jak świat*, p. 101.

<sup>30</sup> “Pamiętam ten dzień w Wilnie, na placu Katedralnym” [W t. 2, p. 306].

<sup>31</sup> “I nauczyciel polskiego/ Szlachetnie recytował początek ‘Genезis z Ducha’” [W t. 2, p. 307].

<sup>32</sup> “Dozgonna i pozgonna przyjaciółka” [W t. 2, p. 307].

author's memory of the past is inextricably bound up with the memory of other people, each of whom brings his own time with him. These individual times add up to a complicated structure that achieves wholeness due to moments of epiphany. As far as its form is concerned, the poem adheres to a modernist poetics (c.f. "work in progress" or the modern *sylva rerum*), aspiring at the same time to the status of a revelation determined by the timeless superstructure that constitutes the metaphysical fundament of its possibility. From this point of view the *Chronicle* is reminiscent of the Romantic poem of remembrance. However, this superstructure (time redeemed) is not accessed by a linear and cumulative movement of growth, as in Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. The events in Miłosz's *Chronicle* that point to transcendence are not connected by a causal chain. Its composition exposes the freak nature of these sudden insights. Therefore, the interrelatedness of particular moments of individual experience revealed by the epiphanic knots in Miłosz's mature poetry (as I have tried to show in my analysis of "British War Cemetery") should not be understood as fulfilling the unrealized potential of previous episodes. In fact, each episode constitutes a distinct, existentially independent whole in which the subject reconsiders its situation "here and now" by summoning voices both from the present and the past. In this experience the distance between past and present is abolished. Past and present are represented as being simultaneously contemplated by a self that questions its own existential autonomy as the absolute center of the concept of a "time-space" (chronotope) imposed by a mechanistic worldview. The moments of epiphany reveal such a density and overlapping of real (past and passing) presences that the framework of the present moment seems to break apart, forcing the author to ask about the paradoxical nature of time and to account for the fact that one moment contains more reality than he could hitherto conceive of. As a consequence, the less complicated episodes of the poem, corresponding to commonplace (linear or cyclical) notions of time, acquire a new sense as being potentially susceptible to a similar transformation. An even more original representation of this chronotope in which ordinary time and time redeemed intertwine can be found in the second long poem Miłosz wrote in the early sixties: *Throughout Our Lands*.

Even a superficial reading reveals the fact that the presence of the first person singular in *Throughout Our Lands* is much more exposed than in the *Chronicle* where the act of representation started from the life of other people that only gradually intertwines with the intimate autobiography of the author. The "I" in Miłosz's first American long poem expresses the immediateness of its ecstatic communion with the world in an almost Whitmanian fashion.<sup>33</sup> A similar stance was not unfamiliar to the romantic poetry of memory and is, in an almost exemplary fashion, represented by Wordsworth's "Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey, on

<sup>33</sup> Miłosz refers to the author of the *Song about myself* in the first lines of his poem: "When I pass'd through a populous city, 'as Walt Whitman says in the Polish version'" (182) („Kiedy przechodziłem miastem ludnym/ (jak mówi Walt Whitman w przekładzie Alfreda Toma) [W. t. 2. p. 316]).

revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour, July 13, 1798.”<sup>34</sup> In this famous poetical meditation the structure of memory as wholeness, being an attempt to recover the past by revisiting places where the author was once affected by extraordinary sensations, is expressly stated in the initial lines. In *Throughout Our Lands* the gap between the present and the past and a possible perspective allowing to overcome it, makes its appearance only in the fifth part, the representation of a dream vision, and is presented as a task still to be executed:

Between the moment and the moment I lived through much in my sleep,  
so distinctly that I felt time dissolve,  
and knew that what was past still is, not was.  
And I hope that this will be counted somehow in my defense:  
my regret and a great longing once to express  
one life, not for my glory, for a different splendor. (182)<sup>35</sup>

Here we are not concerned with a concrete return to places of the past, but with the attempt to create through memory a context that would allow to save a past to which it is impossible to return in the ordinary manner (the author is awakened by “the sun shining straight into my eyes/ as it stood above the pass on the Nevada side” (183)).<sup>36</sup> This sense of commitment towards “others” derives from the awareness that the author’s life, after his settling in the United States, has somehow worked out, i.e. achieved fulfillment: “Is it a shame or not,/ that this is my portion?” (182).<sup>37</sup> In other words: he implicitly assumes that his life has a purpose, pointing to the redemption of concrete (human) existences in their particularity by means of placing them in a larger context, to which he also, with the completed meaning of his life, will belong (in fact, this sense is identical with the very task of creating a “comprehensive” existential autobiography; no postulate is less egotistic – we remember: also Wordsworth had, with regard to *The Prelude*, to refute accusations of egotism). It is perhaps impossible to justify this concept theologically, but it stands beyond all doubt as a moral postulate. If God proves unable to save and redeem these individual existences in their particularity, the author will replace him in carrying out this task: “And if they all, kneeling with poised palms (like for instance Pascal, who might “not have been redeemed”)/ millions, billions of them, ended together with their illusion?/ I shall never agree. I will give them the crown” (184).<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> On the complicated relationship between Wordsworth and Whitman see: D.J. Moores, *Mystical Discourse in Wordsworth and Whitman a Transatlantic Bridge*, Leuven, 2006, p. 9-29.

<sup>35</sup> „Między chwilą I chwilią wiele przeżyłem we śnie,/ tak wyraźnie, że czułem zanikanie czasu,/ jeżeli to co dawne ciągle jest, nie było./ I mam nadzieję, że to będzie jakoś policzone:/ żal i wielkie pragnienie, żeby raz wyrazić/ jedno życie na inną, nie na własną chwałę” [W, t. 2, p. 317].

<sup>36</sup> „Następnie obudziło mnie świejące w oczy słońce/ oparte na przełęczypo stronie Nevady” [W t. 2, p. 317].

<sup>37</sup> „Wstyd czy nie wstyd,/ że tak mi się dopełniło” [W, t. 2, p. 317].

<sup>38</sup> „A jeżeli oni wszyscy, kłękający ze złożonymi dłońmi,/ miliony ich, miliardy ich, tam kończyli się, gdzie ich złudzenie” [W, t. 2, p. 318].

What sort of crown could this be, since it is only the “day” that “is worthy of praise. Only this: the day” (183),<sup>39</sup> when “with their chins high, girls come back from the tennis courts./ The spray rainbows over the sloping lawns” (184),<sup>40</sup> and the memory of past appears to be a dream between two real moments, in other words: time dissolving? In order to cope with this existential paradox, one has to represent the ceasing of time as something positive. Miłosz’s “crown” is neither to be equated with the passing moment, nor with a state of stillness. Therefore, it must (linking metaphysics with ethics) be the simultaneity of passing moments, a “something” in which what was, still is (not freezing into motionlessness, but retaining its fluid essence). For that reason a simultaneity of times cannot consist of self-enclosed segments. The objects and situations that it contains must be understood as being involved in a process of continuous expansion and intertwining. In *Throughout Our Lands* Miłosz argues with Wallace Stevens who in his famous poem “A Study of Two Pears” tried to define these fruits by negation. According to Miłosz pears in general do not exist; there are only particular pears. Even these varieties do not exist in itself, but are mutually dependent on each other, while being recalled by a concrete human self within space and time: “And the word revealed out of darkness was: *pear*/... So I tried Comice – then right away fields/ beyond this (not another) palisade, a brook, countryside./ So I tried Jargonelle, Bosc, and Bergamotte./ No good. Between me and pear, equipages, countries” (183).<sup>41</sup> Particular objects *in their entanglement* with equally particular and unrepeatable landscapes constitute the elementary content of all human experience (connecting space with the internal stratification of time), but the self-evident nature of this truth makes us often take it for granted. Yet, without this human ability to grasp various complex segments of being in their passing, memory could not represent them simultaneously as the experience of a stable (though at the same time developing) self.

The eleventh part of *Throughout Our Lands* focuses on a similar way of experiencing a simultaneity of times that is even more closely linked to the author’s existential autobiography. The author who has settled in California tries to retrieve the memory of Pauline, a simple Lithuanian peasant woman, a rather distant acquaintance of his youth. We do not learn what she meant to him. The poem is rather devoted to the miracle that a past presence can *be* at all (present) *here and now*. While recalling her presence the author feels obliged (the creative power of memory is, in fact, an inner compulsion) to mention all tangible details that they once shared, due to their sensual faculties. He reconstructs their *common landscape*: “Pauline, her room behind the servants’ quarters, with one window on the orchard/ where I gather the best apples near the pigsty/ squishing with my big toe the warm muck of the dunghill,/

<sup>39</sup> “Tylko to, Tylko to jest godne opiewania: dzień” [W t. 2, p. 318].

<sup>40</sup> “Dziewczyny, niosąc wysoko podbródki, wracają z kortu./ Pył wodny tęczy nad skłonami trawników” [W t. 2, p. 318].

<sup>41</sup> “A słowo z ciemności wyjawione było gruszka, [...] Więc ja do sapieżanki – wtedy zaraz pole/ za tym, nie innym płotem, ruczaj, okolica. Więc ja do ułęgalki, do bery, do bergamoty./ Na nic. Między mną i gruszką ekwipaże, kraje” [W t. 2, p. 317-318].

and the second window on the well (I love to drop bucket down in/ and scare its habitants, the green frogs)” (185).<sup>42</sup> The sentence is complicated by parenthesis that expresses on a syntactic level the essential open-endedness of memory. The poet adds an infinite number of new features.

However, while recalling the past we do never reconstruct its pure shape. The past is always intertwined with the present, or rather with the particular place where we are during the act of remembrance. When representing an entangled knot of sensual impressions we usually unravel it, probably because, quite naturally, we assume that sensual data referring to different objects cannot be perceived and understood (analyzed) at once. Consequently we do not link them with one moment, but with a sequence of moments. It might be worthwhile to look naively at the content of memory to achieve a sensual freshness, even though this can only be regained by a conscious effort. Miłosz’s poem about Pauline appears to be an example of such an effort, the paradoxical attempt of representing reality as an unmediated knot of diverse visual and auditory *stimuli*, exposing conventional concepts of time and space:

Above her rough Lithuanian peasant face  
hovers a spindle of hummingbirds, and her flat calloused feet  
are sprinkled by the sapphire water in which dolphins  
with their backs arching frolic. (186)<sup>43</sup>

This naive way of experiencing reality makes the author draw a far from naive conclusion (interestingly, he starts by formulating the conclusion and only then proceeds to representing the experience by which it is motivated – in fact, we are assisting here at an act of faith): “Pauline died long ago, but is,/ and, I am somehow convinced, not only in my consciousness” (152).<sup>44</sup> The possibility of a simultaneity of times (experiencing at the same time different moments and places) as a naive vision is, in last resort, upheld by the existence of God. In His consciousness the consciousness of the simultaneity of the author’s time (in which past and present overlap) and the time past of Pauline (recalled and again made present by the author) participate, creating an infinitely more complex knot of temporal simultaneity that announces and adumbrates some (ultimate?) state of Plenitude. At the end of the road that has been designated by Miłosz’s poetics of epiphany stands a theological postulate.

Let us now try again to formulate how Miłosz modified the romantic poem of a maturing mind. Above all we are struck by the circumstance that in the case of Wordsworth’s poetry (understood as a *pars pro toto*) moments of epiphany usually

<sup>42</sup> „Paulina, jej stancja za czeladną, z jednym oknem na sad,/ gdzie najlepsze papierówki zbieram koło chlewu,/ wyciskając dużym palcem nogi ciepłą maź gnojowiska,/ z drugim oknem na studnię (lubię zapuszczać wiadro/ I płoszyć mieszkające tam zielone żaby” [W. t. 2, p. 320].

<sup>43</sup> „Nad jej surową twarzą litewskiej chłopki/ furczy wrzecziono kolibrów I płaskie zdeptane stopy/ spryskuje woda szafirowa, w której delfiny, zginając karki,/ płasają” [W. t. 2, p. 320].

<sup>44</sup> „Paulina umarła dawno, ale jest./ I jestem czemuś przekonany, że nie tylko w mojej świadomości” [W. t. 2, p. 320].

focus on *one place*, to which the author returns. Miłosz, on the other hand, focuses rather on *one moment*, in which two, or even more, places co-exist, overlap, and intertwine. These places are linked with the present and past of the poetical subject. In the former case the world is diversified (represented in its multi-perspectivity) by time, or perhaps rather by time's passing. In the later poetry of Czesław Miłosz, on the other hand, the diversifying element is space that consists, hardly surprising for an exile, always of a number of centers (Lithuania, America, Paris, Warsaw etc.), and time – the individual time of the subject – is the integrating element. In other words: space expands in so far as time, the time of an individual man, contracts to one moment that ideally turns out to be *eternal*, linking the totality of his experience in a temporal simultaneity. With regard to these two types of poetry about (of) memory we face an almost unavoidable conclusion. The concept of time has, since the decline of Romanticism, essentially changed. What is the nature of this change? It appears that modern poets do not believe in the possibility of *repetition within time*. Would Miłosz, while returning to Lithuania, be assured that what he sees are still the same trees, the same fields, the same manors, cots etc., and that they are perceived by the same self? He would probably say, slightly modifying a fragment from *Throughout our Lands*: "Between me and Lithuania (in the original "pear"), equipages, countries" (183). Immersing ourselves in the Heraclitean river, in the waves of time, as commanded by the author of "Dithyramb" ("Let us once again immerse in time's waves"), we discover that we cannot repeat "our-selves". When, however, the illusion of linear temporality ceases to protect human identity, the only remedy consists in juxtaposing the various elements by which it is constituted (this explains the mature Miłosz's preference for the device of *collage*). Each second of particular existence ("My house a second: in it the world's beginning"<sup>45</sup>, "On the Song of a Bird on the Banks of the Potomac") contains the whole of our existence, its past, present and the promise of a future. The ultimate meaning of Miłosz's project of the existential autobiography pertains to a paradox: each individually experienced moment lies always in the past, and therefore the eternal moment of temporal simultaneity never passes.

<sup>45</sup> „Mój dom sekunda: w niej świata początek” [W t. 2, p. 33].

## Jan BŁOŃSKI

### The Stubborn Persistence of the Baroque

And hardly surprising, too. Baroque is omnipresent in our country. So obvious, in fact, that it is almost invisible. In Greater and Lesser Poland it overshadows other styles, and not only in churches. To the east of the Vistula, the entirety of the perceptible past is baroque: older buildings are rarer and less visible. Though turbulent and cruel, the 17<sup>th</sup> century was also a period when the eastern provinces reached their cultural zenith, a time when Hosius' efforts begun to bear fruit. Religion indeed commenced to shape the everyday life of local communities. It was around that time that the gentry of all ranks, not solely the most affluent ones, started sending their boys off to schools and adopted customs and ceremonies that were soon to be identified simply as "Polish." The break of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, despite, or perhaps regardless, of its political disasters, was also when the Polish language evolved and acquired features that it still retains. This is how the concept of "baroque" became associated with the idea of "Polishness," and how a historical style became identified with a national identity. Such identification itself is nothing irregular: the "classical" was for a long time identified with the "French." What is rather more surprising is the fact that many Poles, even our intellectual elite, remain unaware of this connection, whether in our Christmas carols, our love of rhetoric, or the affinity for the theatricalization of interpersonal relations. This is why, in order to truly understand the presence of the baroque in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Polish literature (or culture), one must first fully realize that the baroque is something deeply familiar to us, and something perceived not in historical but rather in geographical terms.

The baroque is such a common presence in Poland that it is almost anonymous. As a "bare fact" it is rarely problematized, neither provoking discussions, nor enforcing ideological choices. The baroque is omnipresent in Poland – yet, paradoxically,



cally – it rarely gave birth to timeless masterpieces, and when these were born, they also tended to die swiftly, like Krzyżtopór, the most magnificent of palaces. The Renaissance effortlessly produced mighty talents, such as that of Jan Kochanowski, but the baroque seems to have oddly lacked a powerhouse capable of phrasing its problems in universal terms. Therefore, in order to be understood today, they need to be modernized or reinterpreted by our contemporaries. The most spectacular of such re-interpretations came from Gombrowicz: it identifies the “Pole” with the “baroque man” or with the “Sarmatian”. Such identification, however, is not instantly obvious, it has to be reconstructed, or worked out.

At the end of his life, weary of the Western *episteme*, of all the Freudianisms, scientisms, and structuralisms that dissolve the Self in doctrines and systems, Gombrowicz talks of his *Diary* as an attempt by a “Polish bumpkin or perhaps a country gent to enter European culture... This particular gentle manner was bred into me and is something incredibly resistant... so I walk around with a thoughtful air and without much interest, exactly as if I were a nobleman walking in his orchard, there, in the country side, and every once in a while, trying this or that product (like a pear or a plum) I say: – Hm, hm, this is good but this one is too hard for me... I would describe myself as a Polish gent who has found his *raison d'être* in the distrust of form.”<sup>1</sup>

Gombrowicz searches for a method that would allow him to transform and restage himself to his own liking ... but also to the liking of others, preferably neighbors, in other words, he sees personality as a kind of game.

Hence there is the image of landed gentry (neither lesser nobility, nor aristocracy), someone freely ruling over fashions, customs and culture instead of yielding to them. An image with numerous literary antecedents as well, immediately bringing to mind Potocki, who wrote as much for himself as for his neighbors, it brings to mind Pasek and Rej, incessantly talking (writing) while walking around his lands. Hardly anything could be more anachronistic than being a Sarmatian but being one can hardly be criticized once you have proven your thorough knowledge of Nietzsche and Sartre! On the contrary, it helps in gaining a perspective also on the mighty sages.

“The point is exactly that I come from your rubbish heap... Now, when you look out the window, you can see that a tree has sprung up on that trash heap, a tree that is a parody of a tree” (36).

“Parody of a tree” is a obviously a reference to *Trans-Atlantic* where Gombrowicz rewrites and distorts the scenes of *Pan Tadeusz* through a bloated, grotesquely elevated style reminiscent of the Sarmatian 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. At the same time, he draws us into a highly suspicious scheme that results in the triumph of the “son’s-land” over “fatherland,” a direction exactly the opposite to the one Mickiewicz set out for.

It is not my task today to talk about *Trans-Atlantic* but I will say this: the author is fully aware of a kinship, or even a crossover between the characters. His familiar

<sup>1</sup> Based on the translation by Lillian Valee, slightly modified for the purpose of this essay. Gombrowicz, Witold. *Diaries. Volume 1*. Northwestern University Press: Evanston, IL. 92. (AW)

nobleman in the orchard is a direct descendant of the “Sarmatian gentry.” It is inferable from the style, an amalgam-speech combining the language of Pasek, Rzewuski as well as Gombrowicz, allowing the writer to be himself while wearing a costume. His famous “distrust of form” is a contemporary version of the interplay of truth and disguise, illusion and reality that the baroque was truly obsessed with. Again, the baroque and Polishness prove strangely close to each other: actually, the same. If only Poles were not so much ashamed of their Sarmatian baroque (or their baroque Sarmatism)! If only they could refrain from emulating the supposedly “more mature” ones, from losing themselves in systems and ideologies, and remained, instead, “who they are” – that is, gave in to the writer’s ludic playfulness!

The rhetoric of *Trans-Atlantic* – “Not that I ask anyone to have these old Noodels of mine, this Turnip (haply ever raw)” (3)<sup>2</sup> – is instantly recognizable: it was born of the panegyric eloquence of the baroque. Its obvious abuse of hyperbole, ostentatious exaggeration, is augmented by the brevity and directness of the image. A juxtaposition so artificial, and so grotesque, that it cannot be taken literally. The reader immediately recognizes it as a stylistic device, a word-play, and that is precisely what allows the writer to smuggle a subversive, even scandalous, message in his work. The Sarmatian gent bowing emphatically to the ground before the duke signaled with the same kind of exaggeration that his discourse of tribute is also merely a convention or game, and that – highly fluent in rhetoric and despite his humble bows – he sees himself equal to his superior. And so, the baroque poetics of illusion or appearance makes a comeback.

In Miłosz’s work the presence of the baroque heritage is more moderate, or maybe simply less pronounced. One does hear direct echoes of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century poetry:

Beauty and kisses,  
Fame and its prizes,  
Who cares?

Doctors and lawyers,  
Well-turned-out majors,  
Six feet of earth.

Rings, furs, and lashes,  
Glances at Masses,  
Rest in peace.

Sweet twin breasts, good night.  
Sleep through to the light,  
Without spiders. (216)<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> After: Gombrowicz, Witold. *Trans-Atlantyck*. transl. Carolyn French and Nina Karsov. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1994. 3. (A.W)

<sup>3</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, all quotations from Miłosz are based on the translations published in *New and Collected Poems: 1931 - 2001* (Ecco, 2003). (A.W.)

Then again, one can find everything, and even more, in Miłosz's poems, and so baroque, too, must be found in his work – especially as re-imagining his homeland he simply had no other way than to revisit baroque: was Vilnius not its capital?

This presence will be easier to understand once we think of Miłosz's imagination and the potential he ascribes to poetry: especially from 1968 onward he never ceases to insist that he believes art, especially poetry, to be an imitation, a mimesis, and takes it as gospel that “the world exists independently from...the speculation of the mind and the play of imagination.”

*Mnemosyne mater musarum* he repeats. Indeed, poetry is born of memory, but it comes to life through imagination which saturates the remembered details (image) of reality with meaning. Miłosz speaks of an “eternal moment” and wants imagination to introduce spatial order to the visible world. What does it mean, though, to saturate with meaning, to signify? Probably to categorize details into larger (or higher) wholes (leading to the maximum mobilization of contexts), but also to reveal a hierarchy anchored in nature, revealing itself through symbols and rested upon – at the end of the day – the mystery of God. By immobilizing and sanctifying space, poetry replays and immortalizes being: this seems to be the metaphysical sense of “salvation,” a word that Miłosz was so fond of, using it also in the moral, even in the political sense.

There is nothing, at least at first glance, esoteric in his, if I may say so, scandalously traditional poetics. It would not have been criticized by Fr. Sarbiewski, one of the greatest masters of the 17<sup>th</sup> century lyric. He believes that *ens et pulchrum convertuntur*: that beauty and being converge. It is the source of his admiration and love of everything that has ever existed, even if only for an instant, everything that he wishes to save and nourish.

His poetry, however – poetry, not poetics! – abounds with contradiction and unrest. Kochanowski saw a world filled with God's “generous gifts” and by worshipping the creation also worshipped the Creator but already a generation later this blessed balance was distorted. And our times, Miłosz's times? The moments of completeness – or balance – seem fleeting, impermanent: things, devoid of presence or at least reliance on God, appear to be devoid of being as well, losing corporeality, materiality that brings such joy to senses.

Out of trees, field stones, even lemons on the table,  
Materiality escaped and their spectrum  
Proved to be a void, a haze on a film. (328)

Being unravels, just as letters “turn silver-pale” and “fade.” All seems reduced to a volatile particle play and disperses eventually, dissolving in the mathematician's equation... a contemporary equivalent of the ancient *memento mori*. But the torment does not end there: contemplation of beauty (in other words, awe over beauty) may as well be the source of its own damnation. Is loving creation enough to claim loving God? or, even worse, perhaps the poet needs God only to justify or grace his own aesthetic endeavors? How difficult it is today to negotiate between the religious and

the aesthetic! In Miłosz's work this difficulty becomes an important artistic theme. His artistic condition, one he cannot discard, appears to him increasingly suspicious. He feels somehow distant, maybe even damned:

At a certain distance I followed behind you, ashamed to come closer (...)  
Perhaps it is true that I loved you secretly  
But without strong hope to be as close to you as they are. (357)

The origins of the tear that Miłosz alludes to are not unknown: it first appeared in the baroque, spawning further questions and doubts. One could even say that this tear is inseparable from the baroque. 17<sup>th</sup> century religious rule would seem to have encouraged clear and austere forms but it yielded, also in churches, to forms incredibly rich and prolific. The baroque teems with a joy of life, a possessive kind of energy that was to give birth to modern Europe – Miłosz himself admits to an incredible “voracity” for things. He wishes for the memory and imagination to save and restage everything he has ever tasted and loved, as the writers of the baroque – especially in Poland – who wanted to store everything in their opulent catalogues. But at the same time he cannot do without a religious sanction, sensing that the world is full of evil and can be only saved by an Absolute Being. This is hardly surprising, as the theological educational model implemented in Europe after the Council of Trent, seems to have survived the longest in that “other” Europe that Miłosz so much admires.

It suffices to read a few poems dedicated to Fr. Chomski to understand this fully. Especially the first lyric, from 1934, reveals a baroque spectacle of salvation and damnation – a spectacle that for a long time and through convoluted means was associated by the critics with “catastrophism,” surrealism, or even romanticism. The baroque's religious background (and baroque religiousness) sometimes manifests itself directly in Miłosz's work. When he speaks of salvation, damnation, suffering etc. his imagination brings forth scenes, characters and images of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, as in “The Master” where a baroque composer analyses the relation of music (i.e. – art) and evil. Or in “From the Rising of the Sun...,” where the poet presents himself (or his doppelganger) as a Calvinist preacher. Finally, when Miłosz talks about himself, he talks about someone who has seen three centuries of human fate: the 18<sup>th</sup> century, whose living presence he still sensed in Vilnius, had yet to become enlightened.

Both our major writers reveal in their work a thinly veiled presence of sensitivity patterns that were shaped by the 17<sup>th</sup> century and are marked by the baroque. Importantly, those patterns, models and stereotypes still resurface in contemporary Polish culture, including literature. Gombrowicz and Miłosz interpret them individually, without (or rarely) referring to the philosophy or literature of the baroque. The baroque heritage, however, even if by other name, is deeply seated in their work and they were both well aware of its presence.

It was put to use more openly – though perhaps also more superficially – by younger artists, especially poets among whom Tadeusz Gajcy seems to have been

the first. Gajcy was 20 years old when he was killed in the Warsaw Uprising. In his writing, the baroque reveals itself mostly as an escape route, a kind of disjointedness, the chaos of a world lived as a daily apocalypse...an escape wonderful and terrifying at the same time. A decade later Grochowiak became fascinated with baroque's eclecticism, a bizarre union of the sublime and the ugly, the latter of which was marked erotically. Bryll was shocked by the Sarmatian brusqueness, grotesque, clumsiness, all of which terrified but also clearly tempted him, if only because they seemed really ours, something really familiar.

This similarity of theme was sometimes also reflected by analogies in the poetics. The 18<sup>th</sup> century, in Poland as well, was fully recognized the specific and ornamental character of the poetic language, a stance represented also by the constructivist avant-garde and the postconstructivists (gathered around the "Zwrotnica" magazine in the 1920s), and the "linguists" of the 60s and 70s: already Tadeusz Peiper was fascinated by Góngora. Perhaps then, one could explain a "baroque" understanding of poetry as a self-analysis performed by language, as it was seen by Balcerzan, Karpowicz and young Barańczak.

The case of "classicism," as it has been put forth since ca. 1965 by Rymkiewicz and Ryszard Przybylski, is even more peculiar. Rymkiewicz believes that creative powers do not rely on originality; on the contrary, they are born of repetition. His own "repeating" assumes the possibility of reviving everything that we used to share at a point in time: share as human beings (hence the references to Jung and the archetype theory), and shared by heirs to a particular culture (hence – and following from the Curtius' model – the emphasis on the persistence of the literary topoi and – after Eliot – on the "objective" character of the poetic utterance). This is a peculiar literary program indeed, and without a doubt, one very exciting intellectually. At the same time, to speak candidly, not really that "classical" after all, considering the romantic ancestry of the archetype theory.

Perhaps then, we could speak of a latently-baroque program in his case? After all, Rymkiewicz favors English metaphysical poets, as well as Polish representatives of the early baroque, especially Naborowski. All of which leads me to a strange conclusion, one that is definitely risky. Is it time to admit, sadly, that we have lost the ability to fully grasp, sense and identify with the writing of the "classical" periods? That we can no longer be persuaded by the great commandments of order, appropriateness, harmony and moderation? And that our connection to the classical tradition is sustained – if it is sustained at all – through the baroque that, for those who were born too late, opened a gate, if not to Arcadia itself then at least to a place nearby? Even if it is not so, Rymkiewicz and his contemporaries seem to be saying this precisely through their poetic work.

\*

The baroque in Poland was strongly influenced by the Counter-Reformation (or Catholic Reformation, especially in its Jesuit form). It retained, especially at

## Czesław Miłosz and the Polish School of Poetry

the very beginning, close connections to Rome: the Church of Saints Peter and Paul in Cracow was built only a few years after the Church of the Gesù in Rome. It was this cultural proximity that sensitized it to the growing complication of forms inherited from the Renaissance and embedded in the memory and imagination of artists and poets. But Polish baroque also relied on the not so distant medieval tradition, as well as the local ones, especially in eastern Poland where it slowly acquired its increasingly Sarmatian features.

Those three characteristics of the baroque in Poland continue to return today, subversively echoed and in a distorted manner: Gombrowicz winks at the reader, pretending to be a Sarmatian, Miłosz's work reaches back to its religious heritage, while other writers and poets reestablish their connection to the baroque through affinity for conceit and linguistic sophistication.

*Translation: Anna Warso*

## Ryszard NYCZ

### Four poetics: Miłosz and literary movements

#### The place of the poet, the task of literature

Much has been written, and in much detail, on Miłosz's attitude to the literary and cultural trends of his era, ones that shaped him as a poet and ones he shaped himself, or brought back, or resurrected through his work. What has been written was by several major critics of his poetry, such as Błoński, Fiut, Kwiatkowski, Łapiński, Stala, and by Miłosz himself. To do it again seems inevitable, though, and necessary, especially once we realize that each new work changes our understanding of the place and importance of all previous books, and that each shift in the current state of knowledge and sensitivity determines the result of our analysis – or, in other words, our overall idea of Miłosz's published work. At the same time, it is also an act that betrays and reveals the fragility – or perhaps a particular character – of the basis of the humanities, as we turn out to prophesize from the outcome, shaping succession into causality, noticing what we had known before to exist and what we expect to see. Taking all this into account, also because it is an important matter for the writer, I will restrict myself to a single problem and – neither as the first nor the last – ask about the place of the poet (the position he takes and speaks from) and the role, or the understanding, of literature that this position evokes or assumes.

Miłosz appears to have a strong sense of “immersion in the world,” as well as a strong sense of the consequences resulting from this predilection which influenced him and the poetics condition, as well as the situation of the human being. We are all tossed by elements independent of our will in this century, he observes

(1997 35).<sup>1</sup> Although Miłosz sometimes emphasizes his skepticism toward the majority of “trends” in the Western art and literature, and his solidarity with those reluctant to “the spirit of the century” (1990 9-10), admitting also his own susceptibility to external influence (“had I, as a young boy, been more immersed in the Greek and Latin works...I would have been better educated and less tossed by the so called literary currents” (1997 39)), his fundamental conviction – one which is also paradigmatic for contemporary literature – is never questioned: “The century,” he says, “is largely untold. The same applies to our human lives. *We are in the power of forces which escape our words and our records*” (2006 79 – emphasis R.N.).

But Miłosz’s approach to literature and the world cannot be reduced to a single position uniting several sub-approaches through a personal perspective. In other words, I cannot reduce the trajectory of his work to fewer than four points of view that determine four separate, at least to some extent, types of poetics and functions of literature.

## Four poetics.

The earliest of these could be referred to, perhaps, as the *poetics of visionary commonality*. Miłosz usually defines it through negation, as one opposed to that of the Skamander group on the one hand, and the Cracovian avant-garde on the other; one that – if we were to define it with positive terms – bears similarity the poetics of Ważyk and Czechowicz in Poland and Apollinaire and Eliot in the modern European tradition. It seeks spoken language (conversational and colloquial) instead of autonomous poetics tradition or hermetic diction; puts metonymy above metaphor, and vision above construction, a “superhuman” metaphysical perspective above the artist’s point of view or *opinio communis*; finally, a domination of dialogue of roles and masks worn by a “depersonalized” subject over a unitary confession-monologue of a (privileged) individual. *Teatr pcheł* ((Flea circus), 1932) is a good example of

<sup>1</sup> Quotations from Miłosz’s work are referenced as follows: BL – Beinecke Library no 489, Czesław Miłosz Papers (the number indicates the year); *Metafizyczna pauza*, Cracow 1995; Nz — *Nieobjęta ziemia*, Paris 1984; *Prywatne obowiązki*, Olsztyn 1990; *Pieśń przydrożny*, Cracow 1997; *Wypisy z ksiąg użytecznych*, Kraków 1994; R. Berghash *Wywiad z Czesławem Miłoszem*, „Ameryka”, Winter 1989, s. 93–96; *Życie na wyspach*, Cracow 1997. Miłosz’s poems are quoted from *Wiersze*, t. 1–2, Cracow 1984; *Kroniki*, Cracow 1988; *Dalsze okolice*, Cracow 1991; *Na brzegu rzeki*, Cracow 1994; *Tò*, Cracow 2000. (R.N.)

[Wherever possible I refer to the following English translations of Miłosz’s work: *New and Collected Poems: 1931 – 2001* (Ecco, 2003) referenced further as [page number, CP], “An Interview with Czesław Miłosz.” *Czesław Miłosz: Conversations*. (The University Press of Mississippi, 2006) referenced as [page number, Interview];, *Unattainable Earth* (Ecco, 1987); referenced [page number, UE], *Road-side Dog* (Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1999) referenced [page number, RD]). Where translations are unavailable, I retain original attribution to the Polish sources and provide a working translation of the quoted passage. [(A.W)]



those strategies – it is Miłosz’s take on the “conversational poem,” both colloquial and visionary. I will quote two passages:

And in the evening  
We would all look at a photograph from  
A brother  
In America.  
He had a car and wore a tie every day  
How happy he must have been.  
And when I took up work at potassium mine (Mulhouse district) I sent  
Home a photograph of myself smiling next to a Citroën  
The Citroën was in the picture, the Citroën was in the picture,  
(...)  
People looked up  
Their heads brushed suddenly against the convex sky  
And saw their elongated shapes, as if in a mirror  
A lens, glued together from blue-tinted glass  
And through it millions of eyes  
Observing, admiring, looking at  
The flea circus.

Referring to this period of his writing Miłosz says in 1943: “I was in sway of two kinds of fear – the social fear and the metaphysical fear, expressing one through the other.” Talking about his new cycle, *Voices of Poor People*, he remarks:

Following my experience as a human being in this volume I turn away from the metaphysical fear as it only spawns death and silence, and one is not always allowed to yearn for these. If I succeed in speaking in the voice of the poor, do not assume that I am simply a poor human being and that their voices are my own complaint, one that I cannot rise above. Having been able to conjure these characters I am happier than they are, by enacting their sadness and madness I protect myself from both. Even when I seem to speak in my own voice, there is a mischievous kind of distance between the speaking I and me as a human being: I am simply another voice overseen by the inquisitive mind. (BL, box 1 (1943))

The second quotation is worth our attention, as it indicates a sharp awareness of new technique (as well as its anticipation in the work written a decade earlier) and a turn to the core of the collective experience, consequently, to the new means of poetics expression, characteristic of the second type poetics: *that of public discourse*. Elsewhere, Miłosz notes: “poetry is connected to the colloquial language by a thousand of threads but perhaps it is connected even stronger to the language of public discourse, of speeches, debates and press articles.” (BL, box 8 (1972)). He adds:

For the generation of Iwaszkiewicz, Tuwim, Pasternak (...) naming the sensation was in itself enough but it is not enough for us. If we want to communicate, if we want to move forward, jointly, combining the sensation and the idea, literary genres need to be broken until something liminal appears, in between the poem, the essay and the novel.

(BL, box 4 (l. 60) — emphasis R. N.)

Summarizing this period of his writing, he notes elsewhere:

I began to believe that ideal poetry allows for an unmitigated demand; I told myself and others that there was nothing, beginning with everyday matters and ending with the most complex philosophical problems, nothing that could not be contained in a poem.

(BL, box 8 (1955))

From this assumption, “the idea of *poetry as consciousness of an era*” (BL, *ibid.*) begins to take shape; poetry which turns away from its recent attempts at unearthing hidden senses (historiosophic or metaphysical), and instead claiming the public discourse as its broad territory to reveal the most important and the most poignant aspects of the collective experience. It is assumed to be addressed to a wider audience (such as a society or nation) that it enters into a dialogue with uncovering the “actual” face of reality and the truth of the historical experience; it is poetry as a testimony to memory, one documenting the “*Zeitgeist*” (including ideological disputes, ethical and philosophical attitudes, and social mentality).

The third type of poetics – let us refer to it as the *poetics of a parabolic autobiography* – was born in the 50s and marks an abrupt turn towards own experience, environment, tradition, and cultural genealogy. The sudden opening of the previously suppressed personal dimension was possibly a result of the teachings and persuasion of Jeanne Hersch that Miłosz (which is meaningful in itself) begins to talk about only three decades later and with such intensity that their importance cannot be doubted. It is more than a discovery of a perspective both personal and ethno- and anthropocentric, in which personal events become a “specimen” of universal fate. It is a chance for a new relation to (and a settlement with) one’s past, and consequently, with the past as such – a relation that allows the past to become an accepted (or even affirmed) part of one’s identity, and at the same time a telling *exemplum* of human fate.

I’m referring here to three symptomatic remarks made in the 80s and 90s. In *Unattainable Earth*:

It is a durable achievement of existential philosophy to remind us that we should not think of our past as definitely settled, for we are not a stone or a tree. In other words, my past changes every minute according to the meaning given to it now, in this moment.

(1987 121)

On the following page Miłosz comments on his philosophical remark and points out its particular value to his own biography at a certain stage: “Jeanne (Hersch), a disciple of Karl Jaspers, taught me the philosophy of freedom, which consists in being aware that a choice made now, today, projects itself backward and changes our past actions. That was the period of my harsh struggle against *delectatio morosa* to which I have always been prone” (1987 122). In late 1980s autobiographical elements come to the foreground while the need to describe his interlocutor in concrete terms wanes: “There was a time in my life when I went through a very difficult period of constant retrospective thinking about my shortcomings, my sins and misdeeds in the past. A friend of mine...said that our past is not static

and that it constantly changes according to our deeds at the present” (2006 77). Finally, in “What I Learned from Jeanne Hersch” from *This*, we read: “in our lives we should not succumb to despair because of our errors and our sins for *the past is never closed down and receives the meaning we give it by our subsequent acts*” (2003 712 – emphasis R.N.).

I performed this little literary “investigation” to understand the mysterious circumstances of Miłosz’s turn toward the third, mature poetics; to outline his more general attitude to the past as well as, perhaps more importantly, changes in the ways of thinking about sense and the truth of the past (including the contemporary argument). The past may seem to us to be determined in absolute terms, something already closed and given, finished and unchangeable: we often remark: I said what I said, what happened cannot unhappen. From this perspective, the past is a heavy burden of deeds weighing on the future; a burden that irrevocably determines – or rather takes away – the meaning and value from every present act. Seen traditionally, the future is already contained in the past and consequently our “past sins, mistakes and misdeeds” not only remain forever what they are (obviously) but also brand each future good deed with their unredeemable mark. The story of the individual’s life (or the life of community) falls apart into a series of separate, chaotic, and consequently, cryptic episodes. And when planning for any kind of future appears senseless, all that is left is “delectatio morosa,” a fruitless retrospect of the painful past.

Considering the above, to acknowledge (not only in the privately-individual dimension but also in the universally-human one) that the past is open to the future – since the sense and value of the past are determined by the present biography as a whole, or by present history – not only helps to overcome the trauma of the past and to accept oneself and one’s history, but also encourages the planning of one’s actions. This is especially true for action understood as a basis for a continuous exegesis and condition necessary for the continuous retelling of the tale of life through which the narrative identity of the writer and the truth of his (and not his only) past evolves, crystallizes, and transforms. This is at least how I understand the motivation for the third turn in Miłosz’s life and work – perhaps the most important one, as it was also the most dramatic. This is also how I explain the easily recognizable features of his creative strategy and the poetics of his work from the 1960s, 70s and, to some extent, 1980s. Miłosz believes that this kind of poetry “sides with mythos” (1997 122). It evokes, presents, and preserves in the language the experience of human reality to which it assigns form, meaning and place in the universal order (mythical, religious, or one resulting from the “philosophical fate” in the essence of reality). Miłosz’s general view in this respect does not differ much from the key assumptions of modern literature.

*form is a constant struggle against chaos and nothingness...we enter into a relationship with the world primarily through language composed of words, or sign, or lines, or colors, or shapes; we do not enter the world through a direct relationship.* Our human nature consists of everything being mediated; we’re part of civilization; we are part of the human world.

## Czesław Miłosz and the Polish School of Poetry

Writing is a constant struggle, an attempt to translate as many elements of reality as possible into form.

(2006 79 – emphasis R. N.)

Thus, the reasons for the schism formulating among the modernists become even more intriguing, a schism that Miłosz observed with keen interest, and supported. He usually listed Gombrowicz, and Beckett among his major antagonists but in order to fully explain the essence of the argument, I am going to refer to a writer almost completely absent from Miłosz's work (perhaps due to the cool determination of his approach), to J. L. Borges, who concludes his "Maker" with the following image:

A man sets out to draw the world. As the years go he populates a space with provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and individual. A short time before he dies he discovers that patient labyrinth of line traces the lineaments of his own face.<sup>2</sup>

Borges's "discovery" (present, *nota bene*, already in Nietzsche's writing: "However far man may extend himself with knowledge, however objective he may appear to himself – ultimately he reaps with him nothing but his own biography.")<sup>3</sup> is met with a retort from Miłosz (formulated only three years after Borges's statement): "Who can consent to see in the mirror the mere face of man?" ("Rivers Grow Small" from 1963 (2003 198)). Another of his reflections sounds almost as a direct critique of the declaration made by the Argentinian writer:

as "the Self" fell apart, the need to turn to the object grows more understandable... This intention results, however, in something opposite, as he who speaks, speaks of himself, his tastes, phobias, books, a certain cultural tradition to which we belong to, and the object itself never appears, becoming an excuse for seemingly impersonal literature from which the (historical) portrait of the author emerges." (1997 114)

The main reason for Miłosz's critique and for his anti-modernist campaign is the radical "subjectivisation" of cognition: "contemporary tendency to undermine reality of the world, the shift of emphasis to subjective perception (as nothing else supposedly exists) or to texts, as there is only that which man can spin from himself – this seems to me to be the disease of the era" (1995 246). Among several sources and symptoms of the "disease" that Miłosz meticulously diagnoses in his work, the most common ones result from the reduction of reality to that which remains in the medium used by the subject to establish contact with the world – be it sensual perception, laws of reason, or the quasi-ontological power of language.

We learned of the latter from the proclamations of avant-garde writers, sometimes as distinct from one another as Schulz and Przyboś ("the nameless does not exist for us" says the first, "as if that which was not named, did not exist" echoes the other). Miłosz appears to have shared their view, seen as an expression of trust in the

<sup>2</sup> J. L. Borges. *Collected Fictions*. Transl. by Andrew Hurley. Penguin Books, 1999. 327.

<sup>3</sup> F. Nietzsche. *Human, All-Too-Human*. University of Nebraska Press. 1984. 238.

language – for instance, in “Reading the Japanese Poet Issa”: “What is pronounced strengthens itself./ What is not pronounced tends to nonexistence” (2003 348). He would have objected, though, to the questioning of inhuman reality – mainly because of its impact on the esthetic, ethical and metaphysical needs of humankind. Commenting on Nalkowska’s observation on the “inhuman” atrocities committed by people unto people, he says: “Here, in a moral protest against the order of the world, in our asking ourselves where this scream of horror comes from the defense of the peculiar place of man begins” (1999 103). In “Meaning”:

if night and day  
 Make no sense following each other?  
 And on this earth there is nothing except this earth?

Even if that is so, there will remain  
 A word wakened by lips that perish,  
 A tireless messenger who runs and runs  
 Through interstellar fields, through the revolving galaxies,  
 And calls out, protests, screams.

(2003 569)

It is perhaps worth noticing that anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism of cognition are not only unquestioned here, but are also ascribed value. Here, the basic function of literature is primarily anthropological: the task of poetry is to reveal the truth of human nature and the human place in an inhuman world; a truth which can be made permanent in the poetics form and which can only be learned through a poetic language. I put such heavy emphasis on this rather general aspect of artistic (and humanist) activity, despite the fact that it seems to have been something natural and matter-of-fact for the modernist thought, because Miłosz’s last poetics doubts and questions precisely the validity of anthropomorphism. The last direction in Miłosz’s literary endeavor could perhaps be described as a poetics of meditation, especially considering the amount of exalted reflection in his later texts but I prefer to use different words here, words that will more precisely outline the new poetics territory of Miłosz’s work. It is, putting it simply, a poetics of seeing or rather showing the world, and to be more precise (even at the risk of sounding a little odd), a *poetics of inhuman indication*.

All of this seems obvious on the one hand, mysterious on the other. Obvious if we consider the subject matter of Miłosz’s last books, the epiphanic records and meditations of the *Road-side Dog* and both *ABCs*, his “books of revelations” such as *Haiku* or *A Book of Luminous Things* or, in particular *This*, Miłosz’s last book of poetry. Mysterious, if we consider the consequence of this new direction. In an intriguing commentary on the work of one of the most interesting personalities in contemporary poetry, Miłosz declares: “Ponge’s poetry can serve as proof that we cannot enter a relationship with what surrounds us – be it inanimate matter or living creatures – unless we submit it to constant humanization. His *expedition into the inhuman* is purely illusory” (1997 113 – emphasis R.N.).

As a result, not only the vast majority of modern poetry, but also a large part of Miłosz's work would have to be classified as illusory expeditions. After all, humanizing the inhuman was one of the key propositions of modernist aesthetics, seen as an inevitable consequence of the anthropomorphic human methods of establishing contact with the world. Nietzsche and Brzozowski teach us that "man never knows anything inhuman" due to the "Midas touch" of his organs of cognition which blur the distinction between the condition (and the medium) of cognition and its results, destroying the possibility of achieving knowledge that is certain and objective. The form of poetic epiphany that Miłosz preached and explored was certainly the forefront of such "expeditions into the inhuman" of artistic cognition. It is here that the object not only maintains its past existence but often materializes for the first time, formulating and crystallizing its otherwise inaccessible shape and way of being through the medium of the poem. But even this poetic form had to be situated within the boundaries of humanizing the inhuman, borders which the epiphanic art moves rather than crosses becoming inasmuch a form of defense against the Other ("struggle against chaos and nothingness") as a crucial reply to the cognitive, ontological, communicative and socio-cultural crisis that befell 20<sup>th</sup> century literature.

Clearly, in the light of Miłosz's last poetics, all modern hopes to "speak the unspeakable" and ceaseless attempts to find new artistic ways to "*snatch from things a moment of seeing*" ("The Separate Notebooks" 2003 368 – emphasis R.N.) must be seen as heroic and praiseworthy in their intention but necessarily limited in their results, perhaps even illusory, as "exercises in high style" ("This" 2003 663). This is because Miłosz's poetics rejects the consolation of the epiphanic "making sense" of the experienced world and instead demands respect for the actual reality, even at the cost of accepting its inhuman senselessness, irrepresentability, and its non-linguistic nature. "What is not pronounced tends to nonexistence" he professed not so long ago; now he admits that which really exists, "refuses to be named" („Drzewo"). He refers to his own past experiences and mentions those who took it upon themselves to explore and determine our place in all that exists, and its sense or lack of it, not through discourse but through means that are proper to poetry, evading the argument and instead pointing their finger at things: "this is it" (cf. 1994 8). The task of poetry is – and has been for Miłosz from the very beginning – to affirm experienced reality, in other words, "awed admiration. *Admiration of the density of things, density of time, of oneself and others in time*" (BL, box 2, 1959–1960 — emphasis R. N.); even if it is increasingly the experience of a fleeting world, one "not exactly stable and not exactly real... a sense that the world is without stable foundation" (1995 247). From this affirmation emerges another experience, one much more striking: that of the inscrutable otherness of the inhuman world – or of the world itself – "which I do not attempt to name" (2003 663).

Here, on the "other side" of the modern thought and art, language renounces its "high" function of representation and interpretation (that is, the function of presenting and making sense) of reality. It becomes an indicator, a trace, an index, an ostensive function which points not to the aim (such as symbolic object of refer-

ence), nor to structure (such as icon), but to being itself. Mainstream modernism in poetry presented the unknown through the categories of the already known, placing the inexpressible inside the “world of socialized saying” (to use Brzozowski’s turn of phrase), and thereby broadening its borders. Miłosz’s poetics of “inhuman indication” begins with the recognition of the inability to think that which is inhuman. This is probably why its (poetic) language seems to rely on demonstration and reflection, like an index – neither resembling its object nor representing it conceptually but, as Peirce’s puts it, directing attention to it by blind compulsion.<sup>4</sup> By a deliberate “suspension” of knowledge, borders of the comprehensible and representable world are highlighted and the presence of the indexical function becomes apparent. It is poetry that not only shows the real world in its inhuman dimension (as something beyond representation, non-interpretable, non-signifying or meaningless), but seems to retain an actual relationship with this world.

I don’t want to go too far in my divagations. But if Lyotard<sup>5</sup> was right, if only that which is human can attempt to think that which is inhuman (and see in it its own beginning and end), in other word, if it is man’s peculiar property to be inhabited by – and to live surrounded by that which is inhuman, then a sufficient task for poetry (and a most difficult one) is not to make permanent, build, or interpret, not even to present (as these are all secondary or illusory tasks), but to point to the “inhuman” aspects of being on the most primary level of existential testimony. Consequently, Miłosz’s “expedition into the inhuman” is no longer a reformulated passion for “tracing” unattainable reality with the help of traditional or modern ways of poetics cognition. It is a way of discovering that poetry itself can be the “trace,” an “ostensive definition” of reality.

Be yourselves, things of this earth, be yourselves!  
 Don’t rely on us, on our breath,  
 On the fancies of our treacherous and avid eye.  
 We long for you, for your essence,  
 For you to last as you are in yourselves:  
 Pure, not looked at by anybody.

(2003 595)

## A short conclusion

Describing Miłosz’s four poetics, I emphasized mostly those differences which invalidate all attempts to reduce them to a single, overarching artistic stance. This does not mean that I am blind to their kinship, common motifs, and techniques, nor to the causality in the development, and to the continuum of Miłosz’s poetics endeavor as a whole. Miłosz himself often emphasized – and continues to empha-

<sup>4</sup> Ch. S. Peirce. *Wybór pims semiotycznych*, wybór H. Buczyńska-Garewicz, Warszawa 1997. 108

<sup>5</sup> J.-F. Lyotard *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. G. Bennington and R. Bowlby, Stanford 1991. 2–4.

size – the wholeness of his work. One particular interpretative trace, though, seems to support the distinction I propose. In *Chronicles* (Kroniki), he confesses that his whole life seems to have been “a quest beyond the word” („O bezgraniczny...”). And indeed, a continuous quest beyond the (available) word determines the general direction and the dominant idea of Miłosz’s work.

His first poetics – that of visionary commonality – could be described as an attempt at “finding the word” for the previously nameless; at giving names to the yet unnamed, revealing the muted or marginalized aspects of everyday life and existential experience. The poetics of public discourse crosses the boundaries of the traditional lyrical language, opening its domain to all types and genres of modern writing (including literature – poetry, novel, drama – but also non-fiction, autobiography, essay), and to the entire cultural universe of discourse in its all registers, functionalities, and institutional varieties. In its cognitive attempts, a poetics of parabolic autobiography moves beyond this wide universe of human speech, viewing poetry (and literature) as a tool of anthropological self-knowledge, aimed at grasping the reality of the entire human experience – I believe that what Miłosz discovers in his private experience of the past can be identified as a shared property of human reality. It is a reality open to the future by its very (human) nature, a reality whose permanence, order and meaning lie in a constant process of representing, telling and interpreting.

Miłosz’s last poetics – that of inhuman indication (“expeditions into the inhuman”) ventures even further, going beyond the boundaries of human expression while managing to avoid ascetic silence or wasteful babble. To indicate the existence of the inhuman is to indicate a world which cannot be framed by human categories, a world that is without a past and future and can do without the human experience of time, a world inside us and around us; it means to discover a reality which we are and in which we are. There is hardly a nobler task for literature. I cannot shake off the impression that the oldest Polish poet is at the same time the youngest one in spirit; one that can sense slightest changes in the new spiritual currents, but also takes upon himself the risk of new endeavor. It would be difficult to deny that he is perhaps the only contemporary poet to inspire true awe for the artistic level and the intellectual form of his own work and – a much greater challenge – who managed to inspire such authentic awe for poetry and for reality at the same time.

*Translation: Anna Warso*



# Marek ZALESKI

## Instead

It would seem that all human beings should fall into each other's arms, crying out that they cannot live, but no cry escapes from their throat and the one thing they are more or less capable of doing is putting words on paper or paint on canvas, knowing full well that so called literature and art are instead of.<sup>1</sup>

Czesław Miłosz. *Notatnik 1964–68*.

### 1.

In the poem dedicated to the memory of his dead wife, Orpheus obeys the prohibition of the gods of Hades.<sup>2</sup> He does not look back and attempt to talk to his beloved. Despite his obedience, he loses Eurydice: the path emerging from the Underworld is empty. While each departure from the original myth is significant, it does not change the function of the myth itself. Each version of the myth remains a myth – anthropologists, theologians, philosophers, and historians have written much on its function and meaning. What seems particularly important in Miłosz's rendering of the story, however, is a deep conviction accompanying the mythical idea of life that Ernst Cassirer describes as “that fundamental feeling...of the solidarity of life that bridges over the multiplicity and variety of its single forms” (82).<sup>3</sup> Cassirer identifies it with “the feeling of indestructible unity of life,” one so strong that it “eclipses all

<sup>1</sup> Czesław Miłosz. *To Begin Where I Am*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. New York. 440.

<sup>2</sup> Miłosz. “Orpheus and Eurydice.” All further quotations from “Orpheus and Eurydice” and “Treatise on Theology” come from *Second Space: New Poems* (Ecco, 2005). All other quotations from Miłosz's poems come from: Miłosz. *New and Collected Poems*. (AW)

<sup>3</sup> Ernst Cassirer. *Essay on Man: An Introduction to A Philosophy of Human Culture*. Yale University Press. 1962. 82.

those differences that, from our own point of view, seem to be unmistakable and inefaceable.” More so, he adds, it is a sense so “strong and unshakable as to deny and defy the fact of death.” Mythical thought in its entirety, he concludes, can be interpreted as an emphatic denial of “the very possibility of death” (83-4).<sup>4</sup>

In Miłosz’s tale, this mythical sense of solidarity of life is not as much questioned or doubted, as it is brought into view and revealed as a compensational activity performed through mythical repetition and is eventually futile. The hope of victory hidden in the layers of the mythical tale is vain. Miłosz appears to be suggesting, after Nietzsche, that what the tale (that is poetry, philosophy) gives us is an illusion: man invented art in order to be able to bear the burden of truth that is unbearable.

What is, thus, the essence of inversion performed by the author of “Orpheus and Eurydice”? Miłosz’s Orpheus resists the temptation to look at his love-object and obeys the command of the Underworld deities. What is the meaning of the forbidden gaze and of his obedience? The deeper we reach into the history of poetry, the more ambiguous the answer becomes: in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the myth has become a philosophical parable, Orpheus himself – the eponym of the poet and the epitome of the adventure of poetry.<sup>5</sup>

His disobedience is a sign of hubris, in other words, a lack of moderation and respect one owes to gods. Orpheus, however, is more than a mere mortal, he is afforded the status of a demigod: his incantations have the power of creation, the power to intervene in the order of nature and things – an ability proper to supernatural beings. In the Orphic literary tradition, he is an archetypal poet and priest from the very beginning – *sacer interpretsque deorum*, as Horace designated him (Strauss 2).<sup>6</sup> Orpheus’s speech is endowed with a wondrous gift: “Nothing can resist its force. *Carmina vel coelo possunt deducere lunam*” – songs even by the moon can be dragged down from heavens (Cassirer 110).<sup>7</sup>

His dual, liminal condition of being both human and divine subverts completely the order that has been set as natural, making him a figure of that which paradoxically situates him beyond good and evil, both elevating him and being the source of his misfortune. Orpheus’s actions are an act of transgression, as Lévinas observes in his essay on Blanchot’s Orphic study,<sup>8</sup> an attempt to enter the space of Mystery, the

<sup>4</sup> Cassirer, 83-84.

<sup>5</sup> In *Descent and Return. The Orphic Theme in Modern Literature* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge–Massachusetts 1971) W.A. Strauss remarks on how in postmodernity the Orphic myth began to function as an interpretative metatext, a myth analyzing the myth (2). In *The Orphic Moment. Shaman to Poet- thinker in Plato, Nietzsche & Mallarmé* (State University of New York Press 1994) Robert McGahey (after Elizabeth Sewall) similarly reflects on contemporary Orphic poetry as “poetry thinking itself.” (xvi)

<sup>6</sup> Strauss, *Descent*. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Cassirer, *Essay*. 110.

<sup>8</sup> Emanuel Levinas. *Spojrzenie poety* (“Le Regard du Poète”) transl. M.P. Markowski, “Literatura na swiecie” 1996 no. 10. 71 (All further references to Levinas are based on the Polish translations of his essay – AW)

matrix of being – to quote Paul de Man following Heidegger’s exegeses of Hölderlin as Orphic poet – a space where he not only speaks of Being, but says Being itself (256).<sup>9</sup>

Orpheus’s actions seem condemnable: they are a transgression violating the order of the realm of death, an attempt to bring back to life that which has already died and has been irreversibly torn from the order of human temporality. The border between the world of the dead and the world of the living is also clearly demarcated in Miłosz’s poem. Orpheus is not allowed to speak, nor to look at Eurydice in the realm of the dead. Language seems to belong to the same order as the forbidden gaze. It seems to be an action that has the same purpose. Name giving is an imitation of divine creation: in another poem Miłosz reflects “What is pronounced strengthens itself./ What is not pronounced tends to nonexistence” (2003 350). Language is thus something positive, although less powerful, than the gaze in its power to reach the object of adoration. One must ask: what is meaning of the gaze here and what is the obedience of the prohibition?

Both questions will be easier to answer set against the analysis of Orpheus’s gesture performed by Maurice Blanchot, Miłosz’s contemporary and a writer perfectly opposite to Miłosz. In Blanchot’s analysis of the Orphic myth, literature is viewed as an enterprise aiming to reclaim that which has been lost.<sup>10</sup> Orpheus looks back and loses Eurydice: his gaze is supposed to confirm the existence of his beloved but instead, it kills her for a second time. Orpheus’s gaze annihilates, destroys, makes absent. The myth is, thus, an allegory of the failure of poetry in its attempts to recover that which has been lost. Orpheus’s descent underground symbolizes the attempts of the poet descending into the space that Blanchot calls the Night. In Orphic mythology, it is the space of death but also of primordial chaos from which the worlds of gods and humans emerge. It is presided over by Nyx, believed to be the mother of gods.<sup>11</sup> For the Romantics, for instance for Novalis, night is a space of mystery and a source of art accessible through dreams or madness seen as the night of the mind. In Mallarmé’s Orphic mythology, night is an energy field of language, a matrix of being (in Heidegger’s sense) – consequently, it is a space in which being reveals itself but also a kingdom of death and nothingness (that Mallarmé adores and calls “his Beatrice”<sup>12</sup>). In Blanchot’s essay, Eurydice is also referred to as the “Night,” personifying the hidden sense and inspiration, the space of mystery that the artist wishes to access. One could thus risk a proposition that for the modernist poets the gaze of Orpheus is a metaphor of a look into the mysterious matrix of meaning: it is what looking directly into God’s face is for the biblical tradition, a look into the face of mystery.

<sup>9</sup> Paul de Man *Blindness and Insight*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1983. 256.

<sup>10</sup> Maurice Blanchot. “The Gaze of Orpheus.” *The Space of Literature*. University of Nebraska Press, 1982.

<sup>11</sup> See also: A. Krokiewicz *Studia orfickie*. (Orphic Studies) Biblioteka “Meandra.” Warsaw, 1947, p. 41 and elsewhere, and R. McGahey *The Orphic Movement*, xviii and elsewhere.

<sup>12</sup> McGahey, xvi-xvii and 119-121.

In Blanchot's essay "The Gaze," Eurydice is both a lost wife and a symbol of art. Eurydice is the furthest that art can reach. Under a name that hides her and a veil that covers her, she is the profoundly obscure point toward which art and desire, death and night, seem to tend. She is the instant when the essence of night approaches as the *other* night. (171) Blanchot's metaphors are challenging to interpret. They are, as Lévinas remarks, an attempt to move towards "expressing the inexpressible," to address the negativity of presentation (74-5).<sup>13</sup> The understanding of otherness as the "eternal streaming of the outside," as something free of the mediation of our cognition, assumes the possibility of presentation free from the trap of objectification.

Stamelman points out that Blanchot's reasoning is sustained by a paradox where separation is a form of bond, where distance is closeness and where absence is presence.<sup>14</sup> But Orpheus himself is a paradox, too, a "gap, border and bridge" says McGahey in his reconstructions of the Orphic tradition in mythology and poetry. As an intermediary between gods and people, Orpheus is also an intermediary between the manic Dionysus and the mantic Apollo, between the free will and the subordination to the power of daimonion, between the doric and the phrygian order, brought back by Nietzsche at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He unites other contradictions as well: one between the human and the animalistic, the spiritual and the carnal. This contradictory condition, notes McGahey, is characteristic of shamans leading the rites that gave birth to the Greek tragedy: the "shaman's incantation (*epoidos*) becomes the tragedian's *oima*, which teaches the tribe – later the polis – how to move among conflicting demands in an existence that is basically tragic" (xv).<sup>15</sup> McGahey believes that the contradictory condition of the shaman reveals itself in Orpheus's subsequent incarnations: we can find it in the legend of Orpheus on the Argos, in Empedocles and Heraclitus, in Plato who was a philosopher and an Orphic poet despite himself, and in Mallarmé, a poet-thinker, magician and alchemist, father of poetic modernity.

Blanchot's reasoning goes even further. In order to fully grasp its logic one needs to reconstruct his views on the essence of the literary presentation, on the possibility and task of literature. The author of *L'Espace littéraire* grounds his view in the belief that the necessity to present reality derives from the constant awareness of loss. For Blanchot, writing itself is kindred to the ultimate form of loss – death. Thus, death, or nothingness, becomes literature's hermeneutic circle. Writing has its origin in the sense of loss but also, paradoxically, fulfills itself positively in negativity. Writing fulfills itself in the conviction of inexpressability, in the constatation of failure that each attempt at literary representation ends up to be, mirroring the ultimate failure of the attempt to communicate the reality of death. Blanchot's formulation is even stronger. He assumes that death is not something given to us but something assigned and, as it was to Heidegger, it is the *telos* of the human being: each *Dasain* is its own

<sup>13</sup> Lévinas. 74-5.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Stamelman, *Lost Beyond Telling. Representation of Death and Absence in Modern French Poetry*, Cornell University Press, 1990.

<sup>15</sup> R. McGahey, xv.

tombstone one should live in a way that it allows one to engrave a worthy epitaph on it. Blanchot also believes death to be the *telos* of the literary text, or a space in which each act of writing inevitably fulfills itself or, more importantly, completes itself. The writer is nothingness at work, and death and nothingness are the “hope of language,” he says in his 1947 essay titled “Literature as the Right to Death” (336).<sup>16</sup> Writing is an experience of the wondrous power of negativity in his metaphysic, it is death that is a figure of possibility and of the possible. Writing – alas! – language itself appears instead of reality, taking place of that which fundamentally no longer is: if reality, despite seeming obvious, was not a problematic presence, language and literature would be unnecessary. Writing is founded on the sense of lack of access to reality, it articulates absence the fullest expression of which is death. Writing is thus an embodiment of nothingness, even if secondary to the original and constituting its poor imitation – an embodiment of nothingness still. And it has, as death does, the power of negativity, it destroys what it represents.

Language is reassuring and disquieting at the same time...I say, “This woman,” and she is immediately available to me, I push her away, I bring her close, she is everything I want her to be, she becomes the place in which the most surprising sort of transformations occur and actions unfold. We cannot do anything with an object that has no name...I say ‘This woman.’ Hölderlin, Mallarmé, and all poets whose theme is the essence of poetry have felt that the act of naming is disquieting and marvellous. A word may give me its meaning, but first it suppresses it. For me to be able to say, ‘This woman,’ I must somehow take her flesh-and-blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her. The word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being. The word is the absence of that being, its nothingness, what is left of it when it has lost being – the very fact that it does not exist. Considered in this light, speaking is a curious thing. (322)<sup>17</sup>

Thus, language appears instead of what “is.” Not only does it deprive things of their ontological reality, it also cannot retrieve the meaning of that which has been lost in the well of the past. It has no power to recover what it has made the object of its presentation by turning into an image or a metaphor. It builds constructions that supposedly refer to reality, puts itself instead of it and replaces the other presence, pushing it away into nonexistence. Talking about things and naming things equals wiping away, destroying the object of the utterance.

And, certainly, when I speak, I recognize very well that there is speech only because what “is” has disappeared in what names it, struck with death so as to become the reality of the name...Something was there that there is no longer. How can I find it again, how can I, in my speech, recapture this prior presence that I must exclude in order to speak? In order to speak it? And here we will evoke the eternal torment of our language when its longing turns back toward what it always misses, through the necessity under which it labors of being the lack of what it would say. (36)<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Blanchot. “Literature and the Right to Death.” *The Work of Fire*. Stanford University Press, 1995. 336

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 322.

<sup>18</sup> Blanchot. *The Infinite Conversation*. University of Minnesota Press. 1992.36

Stamelman says that Blanchot wants to “stay true” to this absence. Words denote not things but absence of things and this is why language assumes loss. This is why, if it wants to express absence that it signifies, it must turn to silence and lack itself (39).<sup>19</sup> Writing is an act of furnishing the void, an act of disappearing. A paradoxical act, as it assumes negative fulfillment as its positive goal: it is meant to say nothing, express nothingness, articulate lack or absence, fulfill itself as an act of non-representation, and all that means giving up on its figurativeness.

Language, thus, according to Blanchot, is characterized by a tricky ambivalence: a power to annihilate and an illusion of bringing back. What appears in language, appears in it *instead* of reality. The word appears instead of the thing but the property that allows it to function instead, to create distance between the thing and its linguistic representation at the same time proves the existence of a relation between them. By making the thing absent, the word gives it meaning that can only be given to it by language. Something disappears from reality in order to appear in the text. Writing brings literature to life but pushes the world into nothingness because: “language can begin only with the void; no fullness, no certainty can ever speak... Negation is tied to language” (324).<sup>20</sup>

Seen in this light also the speaking subject is subjected to negative transgression and alienation: it exists in separation from the real self, leading an alternate, shadow existence in the text. Situating itself in the text, it becomes its own other. The individual subject entrusts its existence to the impersonality of the language. Blanchot’s ontology of writing and literature found its continuation in the work of Roland Barthes: “to know that writing compensates for nothing, sublimates nothing, that it is precisely there where you are not,”<sup>21</sup> says Barthes in *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*. For Blanchot, language does not articulate feelings, it does not express the personality of the writer, it does not represent his world: rather, it is an extension of the void into which the speaking “I” turns itself. It erases the subject from the text throwing it at the mercy of the linguistic self, of impersonal meanings that constitute themselves in word play. Elsewhere Barthes speaks of language as a room where all doors are locked, one cannot enter the language nor leave it. For Blanchot, it is an ontological threshold: the doors of language leading to existence also lead into the void. Language is thus founded on the sense of loss.

## 2.

Miłosz’s thought is diametrically different from Blanchot’s, even though, as a modern poet, he shares with the author of *LEspace littéraire* the awareness of the

<sup>19</sup> Stamelman, 39.

<sup>20</sup> Blanchot, “Literature and the Right to Death.” 324.

<sup>21</sup> Roland Barthes. *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*. Hill and Wang, 2010. 100. Earlier he notes: “Someone would have to teach me that one cannot write without burying ‘sincerity’” (that is, usurping the hope to access reality – MZ) and adds: “always the Orpheus myth: not to turn back.”

ontological break between language and reality. Miłosz, however, draws drastically different conclusions, and consequently, builds a different mythology of literature. To write that Miłosz removes himself from the Orphic mysticism that found its home in the modern poetry would not be enough: the author of *City Without a Name*, is reluctant, even hostile to it: at the World Poetry Conference (1967) he spoke of poetry as energy and of the mysterious complicity between energy, movement, mind, life, and health, insisting that poems – whether optimistic or pessimistic – are always written “against death” (346).<sup>22</sup> From *Three Winters* onward, he always situates his poetry on the side of life, light, and movement, fervently praising existence. His idea of literature is thus directly the opposite of Blanchot’s vision marked by negativity. If Blanchot sees transgression taking place on paper to be the goal and nourishment of literature: from existence to nonexistence, Miłosz argues the contrary, as that which is not pronounced, tends to nonexistence.

He declares himself to be a poet of “is” – in all senses of the word, from the physical to the metaphysical one, always siding with what is referred to today as the “metaphysics of presence.” This is what happens also in his Orphic poem. Orpheus attempts to sway Persephone and the gods of Underworld by singing the beauty of the world, and perceives his affirmation of being and existence as his poetic achievement.

He sang the brightness of mornings and green rivers,  
 He sang of smoking water in the rose-colored daybreaks,  
 Of colors: cinnabar, carmine, burnt sienna, blue,  
 Of the delight of swimming in the sea under marble cliffs,  
 Of feasting on a terrace above the tumult of a fishing port,  
 Of tastes of wine, olive oil, almonds, mustard, salt.  
 Of the flight of the swallow, the falcon,  
 Of a dignified flock of pelicans above the bay,  
 Of the scent of an armful of lilacs in summer rain,  
 Of his having composed his words always against death  
 And of having made no rhyme in praise of nothingness. (2005 100)

In Miłosz’s poem, Orpheus’s song reverberates against its traditional readings. Beginning with Virgil and Ovid, Orpheus’s song is a tale of pain after loss, a lament after the dead beloved, a lover’s complaint against the cruelty of fate and an attempt to enchant it through a mournful incantation. When Orpheus sings one could think that the “world of grief arose,” as Rilke tells us. This time, however, Orpheus’s song praises life and its wonders. It remains in discord with the poetic tradition but not necessarily with Orphic mythology. Yearning after death found in the archaic Orphic literature and echoing the Minoan metaphysics, is adjacent to a praise of life clearly present in the later Orphic hymns from the 3rd century and in the writing of Neoplatonists who viewed Orphism as a source of their philosophy.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Miłosz at *Rencontre Mondiale de poésie (World Poetry Conference)*, Montreal, September 1967. In: *Zaczynając od moich ulic*. Paris, 1985. 346.

<sup>23</sup> Krokiewicz, 23 and 35-36.

Miłosz's praise of love is Orphic as well. From the Orphics to Plato and his doctrine of Eros, love was seen not only as a fulfillment of an erotic desire, and a manifestation of sexuality, but also as a unity of souls whose "emotional wisdom is more perfect than the purely intellectual and egoistical individual wisdom." It is love that allows man to "transform from a cripple, an alienated piece of reality, into a whole created with another man, more perfect than each of them is separately, it is love that creates a sense of fundamental connection to the rest of the universe, a sense of entering the path to true happiness and freedom as man throws away the yoke of individual poverty and enriches his own self with the other self that is gifted to him" (59).<sup>24</sup> This is the understanding of love in Miłosz's "Orpheus and Eurydice."

He remembered her words: "You are a good man."

He did not quite believe it. Lyric poets

Usually have – as he knew – cold hearts.

It is like a medical condition. Perfection in art

Is given in exchange for such an affliction.

Only her love warmed him, humanized him.

When he was with her, he thought differently about himself.

He could not fail her now, when she was dead. (2005 99)

The Orphic and Neoplatonic elements of the tradition that Miłosz embraced studying the writings of gnostics, Fathers of the Church, and exegetes of Scripture, resound in his poem but not only there. And those pointed out so far are by no means a complete list. In fact, all of the important Orphic ideas echo through Miłosz's writing. The idea of connection between the whole and the multiple is one of the key assumptions of Orphism: the Orphics believed that multiplicity emerges from the whole but also returns to it and therefore all things are one. This is symbolized by Zagreus-Dionysus, torn to pieces by Titans and reborn from the heart, representing a whole forced against its will to turn into multiplicity and later returning to the original state.

Zagreus exists doubly after being torn apart and burnt to ashes by the Titans, first as one person, Dionysus, born from his heart, and second, as the multiplicity of all human souls (symbolized by the innumerable particles of ash) that has to be purified of the murderous Titanic impulses and therefore enter various human, animal and plant bodies until they reach the salvation of apotheosis or are condemned to eternal punishment in Tartarus: "For before now I have been at some time boy and girl, bush, bird, and a mute fish in the sea" writes Empedocles. (50, 81)<sup>25</sup>

Vision of the world as a great cosmic transformation found Miłosz's early volume, *Three Winters*, is complemented by the concept of *apokatastasis* (the idea of reconstitution or restitution of the lost original condition, and eventually of unity) present in his writing from the 70s onwards. Correspondingly, the idea of the pilgrimage of souls is reflected in the imaginary and phantasmagoric stagings of the speaking voices and in

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<sup>24</sup> Ibidem 59.

<sup>25</sup> Krokiewicz, 50 and 81.



the desire for multiple incarnations: "I would be everything/ Perhaps even a butterfly of a thrush, by magic" (2003 164). "I was wearing plumes, silks, ruffles and armor/ Women's dresses, I was licking the rouge./ I was hovering at each flower from the day of creation/ I knocked on the closed doors of the beaver's halls and the mole's" (2003 193).

Similar observations can be made regarding Miłosz's concept of life after death and immortality. Here, however, poetic Orphic mythology seems to function in a very particular manner: no longer belonging to the private museum of images it becomes something more than element of living tradition. It acquires a religious dimension but – importantly – in his other poems, not in "Orpheus and Eurydice"! In "Orpheus and Eurydice" it is distorted, negated, and abandoned, which only adds to the poem's importance and places it among those works that reveal choices and decisions fundamental to Miłosz and his philosophy of literature. Its exceptional character is thus of fundamental importance also to us. How are we to understand the will to continue and the act of rebellion?

In the Orphic belief, those chosen by gods, following the life on earth and the release from the cycle of eternal lives, will live on the fortunate islands experiencing eternal bliss. For them, life after death will be a continuation of earthly life but without its suffering and afflictions. The conviction that the other world is same as this one ("same" is to be understood as an affirmation of life's beauty and sweetness – otherwise one should probably doubt the idea of divine goodness and love of creation) returns often in Miłosz's writing. Ancient Greeks, however, had a different eschatological vision: in Homer, souls of the dead "lead an insufferably empty and artificial existence of quite unnecessary underworld shadows" and their "immortal soul is that part of man which is worse and inferior to the mortal body" (78, 56).<sup>26</sup> As such, to use Krokiewicz's formulation, "hopelessly gray eschatology" appears also in Miłosz's poem; earlier, in "On Parting with My Wife, Janina" and "Treatise on Theology," we will find doubt about the idea of resurrection and immortality of the soul. One cannot, however, ascribe atheism to the "gray eschatology" of Miłosz's poem: despair resulting from the thought that the Orphic-Christian longing may be nothing more than a great illusion is a negative proof of the existence of the object of faith. It is precisely its impossible presence that becomes the only true reality in "Orpheus and Eurydice."

Under his faith a doubt sprang up  
And entwined him like cold bindweed.  
Unable to weep, he wept at the loss  
Of the human hope for the resurrection of the dead,  
Because he was, now, like every other mortal.  
His lyre was silent, yet he dreamed, defenseless.  
He knew he must have faith and he could not have faith. (2005 101)

Miłosz puts at stake something that lies at the very center of his philosophical anthropology, something that for many years has been the cornerstone of his poetic

<sup>26</sup> Krokiewicz, 78 and 56.

construction. For decades it relied on Pascal's conviction that faith is mankind's inherent necessity, a necessity of the source of sense. Pascal's metaphysical wager was an act of mind agreeing to an act of faith: faith that the world, as Descartes deduced earlier, is constituted in the gaze of God. It is what guarantees its continuation and our sense of reality. Therefore, to look means to give sense and to confirm existence. This very question returns in Miłosz's work in several forms. He considers it in "Treatise on Theology":

Why theology? Because the first must be first.

And first is a notion of truth. It is poetry, precisely,  
With its behavior of a bird thrashing against the transparency  
Of a windowpane that testifies to the fact  
That we don't know how to live in a phantasmagoria.

Let reality return to our speech.  
That is, meaning. Impossible without an absolute point of reference. (2005 47)

It is an omnipresent assumption in Miłosz's writing. If Blanchot believes literary work to be guaranteed by the inexpressible "nothing" in the streaming of speech external to the subject, Miłosz sees it as guaranteed by (divine) Presence. His philosophical conservatism does not make him anachronistic. Seemingly old-fashioned in his attitudes, Miłosz nonetheless finds himself at the center of the debate about the possibilities of language as a medium to present reality: Taylor, for instance, writes about religiously motivated gaze (in other words, the instance of *mimesis* necessary for the poet and replicating God's constitutive and confirming gaze) as a condition for a 20<sup>th</sup> century epiphany.<sup>27</sup>

Miłosz believes that poetic "seeing" has a founding power: linguistic representations and metaphors have energy that strengthens things in their existence, captures them and saves that which "is." But is language also capable of expressing death and absence? It is capable of so much after all: in its potentiality, unveiling the chance to define its ontological status, it allows us to touch that which our intelligence cannot embrace. In "Treatise on Theology" we read: "There is only our ecstatic dance, a diminutive part of a great totality" (2005 59).

This vibrating great totality, the potentiality that is the matrix of being, embodied by the Orphic Nyx/ Night, does not find its apotheosis in Miłosz the same way it did in Mallarmé. It is not viewed as seductive nothingness, singing mystery, beckoning abyss. But both from the perspective outlined in "Orpheus and Eurydice," and for Miłosz himself, the words of "Treatise" about the "farewell to the decadence/ Into which the language of poetry in my age has fallen" reveal themselves not to be the last...Can its teaching be that there is nothing else on the other side? The barrier between "here" and "there" is insurmountable. Poetic journeys to hell are futile, there is no reason to look into the abyss in the hope of bringing back that which has been lost. When we find ourselves on the threshold, in the state of loss, when – as

<sup>27</sup> Charles Taylor. *Źródła podmiotowości*, Warsaw, 2001. 824 and elsewhere.

Miłosz's Orpheus – we find ourselves “Nowhere,” the words from “this side,” words that ensure the world's creation and confirm its existence, lose their magical power and our faith reveals itself as an illusion, a consolation that may bring relief here but is powerless there. “

Because he was, now, like every other mortal./  
His lyre was silent, yet he dreamed, defenseless” (2005 101).

On the other hand, mythologies are futile. They all originate – Miłosz evades the question about the transcendental source of sense as something “incomprehensible to us” – from this world (83).<sup>28</sup> Miłosz never doubts the primacy of what “is” above that which is only the object of our longing, even of our religious longing. He has already denounced Orpheus's gaze before. It was not easy: his fascination with Robinson Jeffers, a supremely Orphic poet, despite the fact that Miłosz did not focus on the Orphic element in the work of the Californian poet, left permanent marks on his own poetry. His adventure with Jeffers's poems forced him to address his own questions as well.

He was not indifferent to the Orphic element in Jeffers, especially to the pursuit of the pantheistically defined unity, although – as I have mentioned – he spoke about it without referencing Orphism. In the conclusion of his essay on Jeffers he remarks:

It should be clear at this point that I am viewing poetry as an appendage of religion (an exact opposite of poetry seen as religion), religion in the broad sense (regardless whether it is derived from *religare*, to bind), but the desired unity can be theistic or atheistic. The muscles and nerves of the mind shine through the word “religion” and it is thus better than “Weltanschauung.” Poetry that avoids the participation in the basic human unifying attempt, turns into trifle and dies. However, this is not Jeffers's poetry and I approach it with due seriousness. (259)<sup>29</sup>

Speaking of the Orphic elements, one more parallel should not escape our attention as it testifies to the kinship of the linguistic imagination of the modern poet and the archaic mythology. Miłosz says that poetry is servant to religion and that “muscles and nerves of the mind shine through the word ‘religion...’”. The frequent presence of carnal tropes in Miłosz's thinking is not neutral in the Orphic context. Orpheus mediates in himself the human and the animalistic but his lyre, too, unites two opposite orders: that of nature and culture. Producing the song, it produces metaphors of the primordial next to the metaphors of harmony and order. Elizabeth Sewell points to Bacon's commentary in *De Sapientia Veterum* on Orpheus's history as a metaphor of philosophy that he himself personifies, and to a sentence from Shakespeare about the strings of Orpheus's lute “strung with poets' sinews” (III.2).<sup>30</sup> Orpheus's body is his instrument and he himself (and his history) is the

<sup>28</sup> Miłosz *Metafizyczna pauza*. (Metaphysical Pause) 83.

<sup>29</sup> Miłosz, *Ogród nauk*. 259.

<sup>30</sup> E. Sewell, *The Orphic Voice*, New Haven, Yale University Press 1960. 58. Compare: W. Shakespeare. *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Act III. Scene 2.

embodiment (*epitome*) of philosophy. Miłosz never doubted the connection between poetry and philosophy. He often declared himself to be, for instance in the poem “In Milan”, “a poet of the five senses” (2003 170). He spoke intriguingly of future poetry in which “the rhythm of the body will be in it, heartbeat, pulse, sweating, menstrual flow, the gluiness of sperm, the squatting position at urinating, the movements of the intestines, together with the sublime needs of the spirit, and our duality will find its form in it, without renouncing one zone or the other” (33).<sup>31</sup> Elsewhere he writes about the need to “start with the body” as the pantheistic view of God – that he finds himself embracing – identifies God “with the rhythm of blood,” finds him “in the gut, muscle, in tasting oneself that is like a cat stretching” (84).<sup>32</sup>

But the desired unity of mind/soul and body is a space of mystery and paradox, an aporia, a space of incongruence and tensions disintegrating it from the inside – as is the space of the mythical tale, *coincidentia oppositorum* of Nicholas of Cusa, Hegelian *Aufhebung* and the space of a Mallarméan text, an associative volatility of language, vibration of sense, constant oscillation and dissemination of meanings. As is the Orphic moment, encounter with the Night. This unity is constantly exposed and vulnerable to the necessary tearing apart, like Orpheus’s body.

The poet cannot feed on this time of the world  
Until he has torn it to pieces,  
and himself also

– says Jeffers, whom Miłosz translated.<sup>33</sup> The mythical tale of the world, told by the body of the teller, like Orpheus’s tale (Orphic legends recount that long after the poet’s death his head continued to speak prophecies) heals in the centuries of poetic language, in the language of tropes among which metaphor is the most crucial as a figure of identity and identicalness of different elements.

This longing for unity that Miłosz shares with Jeffers did not erase his objections to the metaphysics of the American poet. Our humanity is like a cathedral suspended “in an abyss, filled with the anguish of transient organisms passing without a trace” (87).<sup>34</sup> But without our gaze the other, the abyss, though real, does not exist, devoid of meaning. In “A Philosopher’s Home” Miłosz declares “*esse est percipi*” – to be means to be perceived (2003 573). One more factor may come into play here: an absolutization of the poetic gaze, serving the religion of poetry that Miłosz, as I have pointed out earlier, refuses to be a priest of. There are many writers and poets who worship the Work, the mythical Book, enthusing about the act creation competing with the created. Miłosz was never one of them, always wanting to be the poet of that which is.

The gaze of Orpheus, writes Lévinas, goes beyond the metaphysics of *esse percipi*: literature “opens us to the unthinkable.” In other words, it enters into the

<sup>31</sup> Miłosz, *Unattainable Earth*. Ecco, 1986. 33.

<sup>32</sup> Miłosz, *Metafizyczna pauza* (Metaphysical Pause). 84.

<sup>33</sup> Robinson Jeffers. “Tear Life to Pieces.”

<sup>34</sup> Miłosz, *Metafizyczna pauza*. (Metaphysical Pause) 87.

“eternal streaming of the outside,” into that which is beyond the horizon of our perception. The gaze of Orpheus is thus something different from the contemplative gaze, it is its radicalization because it wants to avoid the distance that is proper to contemplation, distance which – although it allows for the abandonment of the “I” and to unite with the perceived – is still a trace of presence and supremacy of “I,” making the gaze an act of *our* will, leaving to us the autonomy of the “I” and to the horizon of our world (72, 75).<sup>35</sup> Miłosz, too, while praising sight above all other senses, sees the fundamental importance of the gaze as the gaze not only establishes the relation, but also constitutes it in a way more perfect than literary representation is capable of. The desire “to see, purely and simply, without name/ Without expectations, fears, or hopes / At the edge where there is no I or not-I” is precisely a desire for the kind of relation in which the mediation of language is eliminated, along with the deficiencies of verbal and graphic articulation that delay and blur the essence of contact (2003 460). Seeing is an act of direct communication, realization of the deictic function; it constitutes the presence of the object as a gesture of pointing does, unclouded by the always unreliable and imperfect mediation of the language.

Can this gaze be free from its objectifying aspect? Never completely! One can try to avoid the mediation of the subject: depersonalized lyric resulting from the Mallarméan revolution shows that it is possible, at the cost of representational function of literature, proving thereby that the perspective of the subject is necessary for representation. One cannot, however, avoid the mediation of language. It cannot be avoided even in the Mallarmé’s and Blanchot’s approach in which the being of things is not named in the work but speaks itself in it, despite the fact that in this perspective the “I” vanishes and being equals speaking in impersonal speech, in the Self of the language (72-3).<sup>36</sup> No attempt at representation can be rid of “I” and tear the veil of language covering the barest reality. But an awareness of this difficulty, and in particular, the knowledge that it is language that “upholds” our reality, inspires distrust towards our attempts at representation, arousing suspicion towards one’s own poetic endeavor, towards “being a poet” and most of all, towards our own presentations.<sup>37</sup> It reminds that they are usurpations and that – as representations of reality – they are always already *ex post* and incomplete, blurring and distorting the object of presentation. Already Blanchot spoke of this particular aspect of literary auto-presentation: “I say my name, and it is as though I were chanting my own dirge: I separate myself from myself, I am no longer either presence or my reality, but an objective, impersonal presence, the presence of my name, which goes beyond me and whose stonelike immobility performs exactly the same function for me as a tombstone weighing on the void”

<sup>35</sup> Lévinas, 72, 75.

<sup>36</sup> Lévinas, 72-73.

<sup>37</sup> This motivation of Miłosz’s distrust towards his autobiographical project is discussed by Krzysztof Kłosiński in “Wymyka mi się moja ledwo odczuta esencja,” Kłosiński, *Poezja żalu*. Katowice, 2001. 118-143.

(324).<sup>38</sup> In “The Gaze of Orpheus,” he says of Orpheus, “the song immediately makes him ‘infinitely dead’” (173).<sup>39</sup>

Literature, even when it wishes to rid itself of the demands of “I” and represent the world, always reveals itself as a form of auto-presentation and auto-interpretation, always unreliable and incomplete. Writing becomes an attempt to give unity to that which is internally contradictory, an attempt to order that which cannot be ordered. It is an attempt to give integral character to a non-integral Self that is non-integral because it is non-transparent to itself and unaware of the entirety of its psychological processes. Literature of the Orphic tradition, whether by Blanchot or by Miłosz, aware that all unity is transient – as it is only a figure of language in which sense never becomes ultimate sense – adds that this auto-presentation is a perpetual process.

All that remains, then, is to become a hunter, forever chasing the unrepresentable, the inexpressible, to love – like Robinson Jeffers loved the wild swan of the world – without the promise of ever being able to see reality’s true visage, to meet it face to face. This is why we must be distrustful of everything in our representation that “is set in the brocade of style” (2003 228).

What is found in poetic representation, is always *instead* of reality. “Orpheus and Eurydice” puts an end to the hope pervading Miłosz’s work, the hope of resurrection of what was in the word. Miłosz’s word wants to be hymnal, it wants to praise what “is” and it wants a resurrection of that which was.

### 3.

The desire to tear through to reality, the hope to cross over the breach, to solve the antinomy between language and reality that evades it, is what drives literature today more than ever, and – as a philosophical question – finds itself again at the heart of writing. The necessity to make present, especially to make present that which had been lost is what sustains and justifies literature. Would literature be necessary if we were in a perfect unity with that which *is*, if we had perfect insight into the nature of things and if things and events did not pass, if memory was a force at least equal to our imagination, if our impressions and feelings retained their intensity forever? Writing literature would be an unnecessary task, *otium negotiosum*, as it was for our ancestors, even though it was more than just this for them as well. It has been more than just this since Orpheus descended into the Underworld and his story became a topos of elegiac poetry.

But can absence and lack find representation through anything else than an illusory and incomplete form of figuration? Figuration that always discredits and falsifies the original because to represent absence is an impossibility, a contradiction in itself and a performative paradox? “We don’t reply for we have no language,

<sup>38</sup> Blanchot, “Literature as the Right to Death.” 324.

<sup>39</sup> Blanchot, “The Gaze of Orpheus.” 173.

in which to talk with the living. And the flowers wilt, useless, laid when we were already far," says Miłosz in one of his last poems (309).<sup>40</sup>

Literature is one of those rituals that uphold the world in its existence. But Miłosz's Orpheus knows about the futility of the ritual outside the world of the living. He keeps his promise: he will not look at Eurydice, he will not try to address her. He will not look because he knows that his gaze is a double gaze: of the man who loves and suffers and of the man who writes of love and suffering. It is also the gaze of a magician, a trickster, a brave who wants to tear the veil and outsmart fate. His gaze would place him in the mythical order, but it would kill his beloved for a second time. Once so obviously present, she is now beyond language, escaping that which remains in the presentation. In the presentation she is always a shadow, she refers to something beyond the image, to something "other" than what the image contains, something that she resembles but is not. She is thus a sign of something that is absent from presentation and this poignant fact makes loss – rather than her – the object of presentation. What has been lost is absent and appears as a figuration of "something other," of lack and emptiness. "Her face no longer hers, utterly gray."

In his refusal to look, Miłosz's Orpheus betrays the condition of the poet and the poet's calling. Departing from the traditional version of the myth, he manifests his disagreement: he waits for a miracle, for a different, happy ending, a triumph of life over death, an epiphany of presence. But the miracle does not happen.

Day was breaking. Shapes of rock loomed up  
Under the luminous eye of the exit from underground.  
It happened as he expected. He turned his head  
And behind him on the path was no one.

Sun. And sky. And in the sky white clouds.  
Only now everything cried to him: Eurydice!  
How will I live without you, my consoling one!  
But there was a fragrant scent of herbs, the low humming of bees,  
And he fell asleep with his cheek on the sun-warmed earth.

Writing is an act of giving sense, it upholds *our* world in its existence. But the dream of poetry as a tool of magic, a religious ritual capable of moving the Sun and stars, of changing the world and resulting in the triumph of life above death – Orphic poetry's dream of a causative language that participates in the presence is only a poetic mythology. "Poetry makes nothing happen" remarked W.H. Auden, who found himself on the antipodes of Orphism and was as important to Miłosz at one point as Jeffers. But – an Orphic might say today – every poem is performative, since the state of things that the poem can be referred to does not exist before it. Poetic utterance has no other reference than itself, no other reference than the will to say of the chanting authorial voice. More so: it is a guarantee of reality, it is in the poetic text that being reveals itself.

<sup>40</sup> Miłosz, "What do I." Selected and Last Poems. 1931-2004. Ecco, 2011. 309.

If seeing and cognition – writes Lévinas – are an act of taking over their object, of mastering it from a safe distance, then the remarkable reversal that occurs in writing allows us to be touched by what we see, touched from a distance. Literary work takes over the gaze, words look at the one who writes (this is how Blanchot defines fascination.) Poetic language that pushed away the world, allows the incessant murmur of this distance to reemerge... it is a never-ending murmur of being that the literary work allows to reverberate. (73)<sup>41</sup>

This new mythology, as hermetic as the Orphic teachings were once, equips the writer with the will of writing, it makes Orpheus look into the well of the abyss, face his own text and disappear in it. But the poem can never compensate for the loss – it is at most a work of mourning which, as we have learned from Feud, always serves life. Is it a figure of consolation then? Things are not that simple. For the author of “Orpheus and Eurydice” writing includes a consolatory function but also the lie of poetry, the immorality of art, the contradiction that removes it from the moral judgment, beyond the world placed between good and evil. It is a recurrent theme in Miłosz’s thought<sup>42</sup>.

As a *daimon* mediating between the contradictory orders of being, Orpheus unites the old and the new. His descent into the realm of death and his return has been traditionally, since Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, viewed as a figure of transformation and renewal. This time his *katabasis* – his journey to Hell – happens in modern scenery, characteristic of our age that for Miłosz is also a continuation Baudelaire’s *cité infernale*, a modern desacralized space devoid of the promise of sense. The image of Orpheus falling asleep “with his cheek on the sun-warmed earth” is a metaphor of consolation: dream can be a figure of live-giving oblivion, of rest and respite, after which memory returns with new force, recovering – through repetition – the image of the beloved. In other words, recovering that which can be recovered. But this poetic image is also a figure of unity, lost and recovered, of an alliance with being in its entirety, a metaphor of agreement to existence.

Is it because such agreement is at the same time an affirmation of the mystery of being? In his poem, Miłosz still equals being with good. He repeats after St Thomas Aquinas: “it is good because it is.” But old categories and notions, although important, receive new interpretations. “Is”, word that Nietzsche believed to be crucial for the European metaphysics, is given explication. For Nicholas of Cusa, Neoplatonist, what “is” exists as *coincidentia oppositorum*. Referring to Cassirer, Strauss writes that the dynamic of this dialectic retains constant, polar tensions between *explicatio* and *complicatio*, between *alteritas* and *unitas*. The only truth, one beyond comprehension in its final sense can only be presented and accessed through the mediation of the other but all that is other tends towards unity and participates in it (16).<sup>43</sup> Nicholas of Cusa believes contradiction to find its positive resolution in God. This is viewed differently by the poets of the “linguistic turn,” such as Mallarmé, who identify

<sup>41</sup> Lévinas, *Spojrzenie poety*, s. 73.

<sup>42</sup> See: *Niemoralność sztuki*. (Immorality of Art.) *Ogród nauk*. Paris, 1979. 161 and elsewhere.

<sup>43</sup> Strauss, *Descend and Return*. 16.



the borders of our world with the borders of our language. In Mallarmé, *nothingness* means universe from which God is absent (89).<sup>44</sup> For Blanchot, negation is the moving force that holds the reality of things in suspension (253).<sup>45</sup> In the writing of Mallarmé, Rilke and Blanchot, *coincidentia oppositorum*, believed to be the principle of being, became a vibrating void, an aporia that is the matrix of sense. And, as I have said in “Miłosz – poeta powtórzenia” (Miłosz, a poet of repetition) to one who is lead by invisible hands, “is” has a completely new interpretation, one typical of post–Heideggerian philosophy.<sup>46</sup> As we have seen, an interpretation not differing much from the one found in the writing of modern Orphics.

*Translation: Anna Warso*

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<sup>44</sup> Ibidem. 89.

<sup>45</sup> Blanchot in Strauss, *Descend and Return*. 253.

<sup>46</sup> “Miłosz, poeta powtórzenia.” *Teksty Drugie*. 2001. Vol. 4/5.

## Jacek ŁUKASIEWICZ

### Poet on poets

In his creative work Miłosz frequently surrenders his role as a poet, or rather, he incorporates it into his other roles: that of a literary historian, lecturer, publicist, journalist, reviewer. Although he discusses poetry and comments on other poets in several genres of his discursive prose, my essay will focus only on Miłosz's poetic work and on what he says in it about poets – about other *Polish* poets to be precise. And he says a lot, in several ways and from several perspectives.

They are addressed directly in dedications and poem titles as recipients of letters, odes, or witty verses. They are written about in the third person as well: from a brief mention or a short commentary to a long ballad or a quasi-essay. Miłosz summons them in their various non-literary roles but sometimes also strictly in their poetic function, as speakers of their poetic work. Others yet make their appearance through quotations, allusions, stylistic mimicry and similar techniques that are too plentiful in Miłosz's work to be thoroughly discussed in this paper. I will thus concentrate only on those instances which mention clearly and beyond the realm of doubt other poets by their name, surname, pseudonym or periphrasis.

That poetry as a space strives to be fully autonomous, isolated from other textual orders, is something Miłosz is well aware of and fears. He uses several methods to break the boundaries of poetry and to open up poetic diction: assuming the role of a biographer, chronicler, and literary historian in his poems, he broadens also the meaning of those roles and enriches with them the space of his own poetry.

Miłosz's poetic work evolved with time: in the prewar period (which for convenience I will treat here as a whole) one will find recipients of his dedications in the poems written in the third person. "O młodszemu bracie" (To a Brother) is dedicated to Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, "Kołysanka" (Lullaby) to Józef Czechowicz and "List 1/1/1935" (Letter from 1/1/1935) not is not as much dedicated to as directed specifi-

cally at Jerzy Zagórski, addressed already in the opening apostrophe: “Jerzy, Jerzy, you bad son, you timid poet and a friend wronged.”<sup>1</sup> Other poets are mentioned by name, for instance Jesienin (in “Na śmierć młodego mężczyzny” (On the Death of a Young Man): “With what love for life and condemnation for God/ placed the muzzle to his mouth Sergiusz Jesienin, poet.”) In “O książce” (To a Book) Miłosz lists several major authors of the past centuries whose work the new catastrophic visionaries cannot carry on.

No more will from your pages shine onto us foggy  
evening over still waters, as in Conrad's prose,  
no more will the skies speak in Faustian choir,  
no more will Hafez's long forgotten poem  
coolly touch our brows, and soothe our heads  
Norwid will no more reveal to us the harsh laws  
of the century covered with red dust  
Restless, blind and true to our time,  
we walk somewhere far

The plural form in this poem is not ironic. But this changed dramatically during the war. In *Rescue*, Conrad, Goethe, Hafiz and Norwid are no longer viewed as belonging to the realm of the past somewhere on the other side of the abyss. On the contrary, Miłosz takes a leap in their direction. From there, looking upon what is now the other side, he sees those who continue – foolishly, he believes – the poetic of catastrophic symbolism, the “twenty-year old poets of Warsaw.”

His writing from the war period does not speak about other poets directly, with the exception of the (already post-war) “Przedmowa” (Introduction) from *Rescue*. In it, Miłosz addresses the poets of the war generation: Baczyński, Gajcy, Trzebiński, declaring that there is “no wizardry of words” in him. He lays his prophetic-didactic volume on their graves, so that the ghost “should visit us no more.” But pushing away from the old shore with spells, he knows very that these cannot work. His post-uprising poems included in *Rescue* make use of numerous talisman-words, such as “seconds,” “pearls,” or “star” (in “Rozmowa płocha”) and of exquisite baroque stanzas – in “Los” (Fate).

It was after the war that Miłosz's poetic space opened up widely and filled with other writers. His poetic invocations addressed those long gone (he asks Jonathan Swift for support in writing poetry that is critical, satirical and mocking but at the same time not devoid of poetic essence) and those still alive. At Tadeusz Różewicz he directs his emphatic praise for the redemptive element of poetry (“And all around thunders laughter of the poet/ and his life, eternal”), contrasting Różewicz with rhetors who preach “official lies.”

<sup>1</sup> Wherever possible I refer to the printed translations of Miłosz's work published in *New and Collected Poems: 1931 - 2001* (Ecco, 2003)) referenced further as [page number, CP]. Where translations were unavailable, I provide a working translation of the quoted passage. [(A.W)]

## Czesław Miłosz and the Polish School of Poetry

And where they sat not a single  
blade of grass will grow

In the satirical and didactic *A Moral Treatise* he lists several patrons: Witkiewicz, Sartre, Rabelais, and Conrad, the author of *Heart of Darkness*. But these were not poets.

*A Treatise on Poetry* (1956) is the main work in which Miłosz gathers other poets. No other poem among his work presents a landscape inhabited by poets as broad, as rich and as complete as that unveiled in *A Treatise* whose composite timeless space gathers together those already dead and those still alive disregarding the boundaries of history, literary history, and autobiography. All those constituent types of space coexist in *A Treatise* but at the same time they do not overlap fully, like slides that have been moved minimally so that the resulting image is ambiguous.

In *A Treatise* Miłosz formulates poetic – and metaphorical, as they are a part of the poetic image – definitions of artistic creation and of the described poets. Behind the metaphors, behind every image there is a lyrical “I” that produced the defining metaphor. He has done that before: “No more will from your pages” – he addressed the book – “shine onto us foggy/ evening over still waters, as in Conrad’s prose” following his comparison-based definition with another, built on anthropomorphizing metaphors: “no more will the skies speak in Faustian choir” and “no more will Hafez’s long forgotten poem/ coolly touch our brows.” Finally, he defines by means of metonymy: “Norwid will no more reveal to us the harsh laws/ of the century covered with red dust.” There is strong poetic imagery in the quoted fragment but it is accompanied by a strong rhetorical and notional element. Immaterial nouns, such as “evening”, “skies,” or “poem” are anthropomorphized turning into images but names of the poets, remaining in the shadow of the images, are inscribed in their structure. At the same time, we know that it is the names that are most crucial: genetically primal here.

*A Treatise on Poetry* formulates its “definitions” using different method. Those identified by their names are actual subjects of sentences. Descriptions refer to them and not to impressions and moods of the reader, speaking voice of the poem. *A Treatise* resembles (or imitates) a textbook by a literary historian, or a piece of literary criticism, rather than an impressionist lyric: the “I” or “we” – readers – are pushed to the background, we are not as much reading subjects as objects shaped by the “defined” poets. This is what happens in the passages on Conrad and Wyspiański. They are presented as protagonists on the historical (not only literary historical) scene. But even they are not portrayed directly. Instead of Conrad himself, the decisive passage of his tale uses a metonym mentioning a character in *Heart of Darkness*: “One of the civilizers, a madman named Kurtz” who “Scribbled in the margin of his report/ On the Light of Culture: ‘The horror.’ And climbed/ Into the twentieth century” (114).<sup>2</sup> Wyspiański is spoken of as being defeated by the “contradiction” between solemnity,

<sup>2</sup> After *New and Collected Poems*. Polish version of Miłosz’s line about Kurtz, also quoted in the original version of this essay, reads “Na memoriale o światłach kultury/ Pisał ‘ohyda’ a więc już wstępował/ W dwudziesty wiek.” Miłosz seems to be referring to Kurtz’s report, and the translation – to Kurtz’s last words. (AW)

the desire to become part of history and to struggle against its fatalism on the one hand, and a style not mature enough for such solemnity and desire.

Other poets of Young Poland are characterized as participants of the literary historical process: either failing to understand its essence; their own dependence on the ethnic language and style of the period (e.g., – Kasprówicz who “roared, tore at the silken tethers/ Yet could not break them: they were invisible. And not tethers, they were more like bats/ Sucking the blood out of speech on the fly” (113)); or passively surrendering to them (as Staff or Leśmian, even though the latter “drew his own conclusions:/ If it’s all a dream, let’s dream it to the bottom” (113)).

In *Beautiful Times* (part one of *A Treatise*) those poets – name-bearers, appear only as speaking subjects of their work. Trapped in their poetic worlds and unwilling to rebel they lose their status as persons. This changes in the part devoted to inter-war authors – they may be wrong about things (and they often are), but they are also subjects of life, and not only of literary texts. They are active in both spheres. One is tempted to posit that this is perhaps partly caused by the fact that Miłosz knew them not only from their books, but also by the fact that they shared historical time. Their work and their biographies explain each other, such as the most famous, most poignant and most dramatic passages on Julian Tuwim. Tuwim – who “shouted ‘Ca ira!’ in Grodno or Tykocin,” (118) and who, after the war, would meet the participants of his pre-war readings “at the ball for the Security Police” – is not a function of style, like Kasprówicz or Staff, but a literary personage. His failures were not failures of language he could not overcome, they were caused by his own conflicts and weaknesses.

Tuwim lived in awe, twisted his fingers,  
His face broke out in reddish, hectic spots  
One could say that he fooled the officials  
Just as he later cheated earnest Communists  
It choked him. Inside his scream was another:  
That human life was chaos and marvel  
That we walk, eat, talk, and at the same time  
The light of eternity shines on our souls

There are those who see a pretty, smiling girl  
And imagine a skeleton with rings on the bones.  
Such was Tuwim. He aspired to long poems.  
But his thought was conventional, used  
As easily as he used assonance and rhyme  
To cover his visions of which he grew ashamed (119-120)

This “thought” needs to be emphasized, given back its fundamental meaning – the thought precisely, and not an element of poeticity. In the passage above, the eschatological dimension of Tuwim’s poetry, one he could not express directly, is revealed as crucial. Eschatological – that is transcending the boundaries of the present, portraying it *sub speciei aeternitatis*, because poetry itself was degraded by Tuwim (or perhaps by his poetic? or by the poet-subject) to opulent poeticity. Tuwim’s poetic

portrait in *A Treatise* seems to be particularly accurate, as is the diagnosis; at the same time this short passage is also an epitaph, as Tuwim was already dead when Miłosz worked on *A Treatise*.

The passage on Przyboś is another famous literary portrait and this time it's a comic, not a tragic one:

In the swarm of the Kraków avant-garde  
Only Przyboś merits our surprise  
Nations and countries crumbled to dust  
To ashes, and Przyboś remained Przyboś  
No madness ate at his heart, which is human,  
And thus intelligible. What was his secret?  
In Shakespeare's time they called it euphuism.  
A style composed of metaphor entirely.  
Przyboś was a rationalist deep down.  
He felt what a reasonable social person  
Was supposed to feel, thought what they thought.

He wanted to put motion into static images. (121) Miłosz's satirical picture portrays Przyboś as either a hypocrite or someone lacking in the breadth of view: a hypocrite who uses metaphors to feign ambiguity of the poetic world that hides rationalism and its common-sense discourse; lacking breadth of view as he fails to see the contradiction between that pliable conformity of rationalism and the cult of metaphor. Przyboś's avant-garde poetry is unjustly reduced to a technical exercise, performed despite historical cataclysms: "He wanted to put motion into static images."

Just as in the earlier part of *A Treatise* he oversimplifies the Young Poland, Miłosz simplifies the avant-garde in the following passages. He views its language as poeticity, different from the one of the Young Poland but stemming from the same root; as a false "pitching of voice," a yielding to the ease and emotionality of the Polish language (except on a different, ideological level) to the infantile idea of "people's power."

Tuwim's portrait suggestively recalls the imagery of his poetry and it is a sphere in which Miłosz establishes a relationship with Tuwim. In his portrayal of Przyboś there is not a slightest formal allusion to the poetry of the latter, it is not brought into view for even a second, having been pre-judged and rejected.

Tuwim and Przyboś's literary portraits are strongly embedded in the (Polish) literary consciousness, probably stronger than any other critical treatment they have been subjected to. Part III of *A Treatise*, *The Spirit of History* (with the exception of the passage on "twenty-year old poets of Warsaw") is dominated by quotation. Tradition is built differently here – Miłosz does not begin with people but with texts (though people are present too, as Mickiewicz is inseparable from Mickiewicz's quotations). The diachrony of literary history mixing with a much faster pace of literary life (that the speaker-author of *A Treatise* is a part of) gives place to the synchrony of poetic time – of the present perceived in an Eliotic manner as coexistence with the past.

*A Treatise* received a lot of commentary, also in the form of the author's own notes. Much has been written about it, as the form of a "treatise" implied the complexity of the speaking subject performing several roles, all of which are subordinate to the basic poetic role: that of a lyrical poet. Miłosz never reached for this form again (*From the Rising of the Sun* is something yet different), he summons and meets with fellow poets in other poetic genres. They are summoned and met with tenderness but also patronized – this is how Miłosz treats those who made the wrong choices: Gajcy in "Ballada" (A Ballad) (dedicated to Jerzy Andrzejewski) or Słowacki in *From the Chronicles of the Town of Poronic*.

Gajcy is inscribed in the topos of Pietà in which the mother's accentual-syllabic verse (in Polish – AW), echoing a lament, is stylized into a folk ballad. Was the decision about uprising the right one? "Gajcy lies in his grave, never will he learn/ that the Warsaw battle amounted to nothing." Now the city has risen from the ashes, past the cemetery two youths are chasing a streetcar.

And I don't know, and may the Lord be judge  
If I cannot talk to you anymore  
And your flowers all crumbled turning into dust  
It's because of the drought, forgive me beloved  
There is never time, and when I come visit  
I have to carry water from so far away

The poem's styling is a sign of helplessness, not as much intellectual, as emotional, regarding the topic, almost as if it was only by paying the price of irony, of balladic naivety of the narrator, that the poet was able to discuss it at all. (*The World* is an example of similarly naive stylization, one necessary to be able to speak of the order of existence during the apogee of WWII).

In "Słowacki" Miłosz uses a conjurer rite similar to the one employed in "Dedication" from *Rescue* where he addressed the dead young poets of Warsaw. Słowacki, too, was deluded in his poetry and about his poetry; he did not accept reality in its order, nor nature in its cruelty. Metempsychosis was an illusion, it blurred the boundaries of life and death.

Oh sad one, loved one  
Sorely deceived one  
It is not the eternal spirit, rebel, Lucifer  
That writhes in the eel pierced with a toothed bone  
It is not him who is so full of vigor that his head  
Against stone needs to be flung, till he is mum  
...  
You were not brother to the serpent looking at the sun  
The consciousness and the unconscious are forever divided.  
Why did you talk so much? We all tremble, like you,  
Because life is final because death is final.  
But here, to you this cognac tumbler.

It is the same ambivalence of summoning and rejection. The conjurer's ritual gesture, alluding to the second part of *Dziady*, overlaps onto the present situation: "consumption of alcohol." One could thus hypothesize (on a different level) that Słowacki did appear because of a "cognac tumbler" (drinking cognac in a tumbler is particularly intense), and that he is at the same time, repelled by the same artefact. The last line, "But here, to you this cognac tumbler," can describe two gestures: I am drinking from the glass, or spilling the offering so that the summoned ghost can leave in peace. Alternatively, I am giving it to you, drink it. You are so frail, your lungs are weak.

One must stress again that the styling of those poems shapes and highlights the common character of the poetic plane, of the space where meetings of poets take place. At the same time, which is typical of stylizations, it creates distance: and so we meet – two poets, the summoned one and the one that summons – on an unfamiliar ground (unfamiliar to the one that was called forth but often also unfamiliar to the one who issues the call), we both meet in someone else's poetic form. This unfamiliar ground is the reason why the authenticity of both speakers must be enclosed in quotation marks.

This evolves in Miłosz's later work. Sometimes making present of the summoned is desired, even necessary, but for some reason particularly difficult on an unfamiliar formal ground. The only solution is to give voice to the summoned poet, not in a short citation, but by quoting an entire poem, as in *From the Rising of the Sun*, where Miłosz repeats a rather long verse by Teodor Bujnicki – "the last poor bard of the Grand Duchee." It is in Miłosz's view the only surviving work by Bujnicki that is worth keeping and hence it is placed among several texts about Lithuania and his place of birth from several historical periods, put together in the poem to imitate the culture-text of the Grand Duchee. Bujnicki's lyrical poem is introduced with epic tonality.

There Theodore took three bullets in the stomach  
At close range, because of which he was spared the need  
To cross so many borders (301)

The quoted poem of the killed poet is a part of the (broadly understood) authentic linguistic tradition of old Lithuania, integrally tied to the rhythm, the physiology of the native land (to the same extent to which we tie a poem with the rhythm of its author's organism – Miłosz writes about it for instance in *Unattainable Earth*).

Theodore will be remembered because of one poem  
Dictated – because it is not the skill of the hand  
That writes poetry, but water, trees  
And the sky which is dear to us even though it's dark,  
And to parens and parents of those parents since time (303)

Miłosz's poem is not a collage; it's an integral poetic space whose components are nonetheless heterogeneous: court records and testaments are viewed as equal to lyrical poetry. Even if Bujnicki is somehow present in his own poem, his presence is



fuller and more real in Miłosz's text imitating the cultural text of the Grand Duchee – that is, in someone else's secondary poetic space.

Some of the poets are mentioned very briefly and occasionally, like Adam Ważyk in “1944.”<sup>3</sup>

– You! the last Polish Poet! – drunk, he embraced me,  
My friend from the Avant-Garde, in a long military coat,  
Who had lived through the war in Russia and, there, understood. (490)

In *Provinces*, Anna Kamieńska is introduced in a different manner, although she, too, is mentioned in a mode both memoiristic and necrologic (as Miłosz's life goes by these two modes overlap more and more often). Part 11 of Miłosz's long poem consists of what could be seen as the main text and a footnote, added in parentheses.

The main text is solemn:

11. “I walk in the disguise of an old, fat woman,”  
Wrote Anna Kamieńska shortly before her death. Yes, I know. We are a lofty flame.  
Not identical with a clay jar. So let us write with her hand:  
“Slowly I am withdrawing from my body.” (529-30)

The following footnote (a memory) significantly lowers the tone.

(Two poets appear, girls seventeen years old,  
One of them is she They are still in high school.  
They came from Lublin to see a master. That is, me.  
We sit in a Warsaw apartment with a view onto fields.  
Janka serves tea. Politely, we crunch cookies.  
I don't talk about the graves in an empty lot close by.) (530)

The memory is imprecise. Information about those shot in the empty lot seems to point to the war period but Kamieńska, who was born in 1920, was already at least twenty at that time. The following poem is entitled “Reading the Notebook of Anna Kamieńska.”

Reading her, I realized how rich she was and myself, how poor.  
Rich in love and suffering, in crying and dream and prayer.  
She lived among her own people who were not very happy but supported each other,  
And were bound by a pact between the dead and the living renewed at the graves.  
She was gladdened by herbs, wild roses, pines, potato fields.  
And the scents of the soil, familiar since childhood.  
She was not an eminent poet. But that was just: A good person will not learn the  
wiles of art.

(531)

<sup>3</sup> Discussing characters that continue to revisit his imagination Miłosz comments on his meeting with Ważyk: “Some of them want to be recalled, while others don't. Adam Ważyk, avant-garde poet called a ‘theorist’ in the Stalinist era, was among those who wanted to be recalled. He was the one who approached me, drunk, in 1945: “You! The last Polish Poet!” (*Wiersze*, Kraków 1993 Vol.3 p.272).

## Czesław Miłosz and the Polish School of Poetry

The texts are split into two differently valued layers: one of wisdom and one of poetry. A sapiential text is noble, poetry ought not to be “noble” (Miłosz repeats this often and regarding poetry he distinguishes two meanings of “noble”: 1) that of a positive social cliché – irrelevant here; 2) free from the Manichean flaw, devoid of “Melody, daydream”).

The portrayal of Świrszczyńska is a direct opposite of Miłosz’s portrayal of Kamińska. Split into the high and the low, the spirit and the body, Świrszczyńska wants to rise above such contradictions “praising being:/ The delight of touch in lovemaking, the delight of running on a beach,/ of wandering in the mountains, even of raking hay,/You were disappearing, in order to be, unpersonally.” Świrszczyńska attempted to solve the riddles that Miłosz is was trying to solve for in his poems.

And the body is most mysterious,  
For, so mortal, it wants to be pure,  
Liberated from the soul which screams: "I!"

A metaphysical poet, Anna Świrszczyńska  
best felt when she was standing on her head  
(“Translating Anna Świrszczyńska on an Island of the Carribean,” 598-99)

Świrszczyńska is treated with trust, Kamińska as a poet – with distrust but both found their way into Miłosz’s poetic space for important reasons.

They are recalled in Miłosz’s poems by his autobiographical and real “I,” he simply reminiscences about them. There are no special rituals used to summon them, no literary historical categories. The poet does not have to and does not take on the role of a conjurer or a literary historian.

In the poem about Czechowicz from *The Separate Notebook* cycle, the subject acts in a yet different, more ritual manner. Is there a way to communicate with the dead across the boundary of death? There is, but an insufficient one – answers the poem in several verses of different tonality. The colloquialism of some of them aims to eliminate or reduce the distance between the living and the dead (“Yet I presume you have some trace of interest, at least as to your own continued stay among the living.” (382)). The high tone of others clearly emphasizes the poetic character of the situation: “you appear now on this other continent, in the sudden lightning of your afterlife”). Czechowicz is presented in the uniform of a soldier from the year 1920.

From shit-houses in the yeard, tomatoes on the windowsill, vapor over washtubs, greasy checkered notebooks – How could that modest music for young voices soar, transforming the dark fields below?...Set apart by a flaw in your blood, you knew about Fate; but only the chant endures, nobody knows about your sorrow (383)

Czechowicz’s poetry directs the reader (or the listener) not to its maker but to a different reality that he created or revealed. Not a biographical, historical, social, but a metahistorical, metaphysical one:

Where are you behind your words, and all who are silent, and a State now silent though it once existed (383).

For a very long time, actually from the very beginning, Miłosz paid special attention to figures of authority and constructed perspectives to properly receive them. Depending on the perspective, the same person was admired or criticized, for example Mickiewicz (as discussed thoroughly by Elżbieta Kiślak in the second part of *Walka Jakuba z aniołem* (*Jacob's Battle with the Angel*)). As the perspectives shift, new approaches are adapted, including the attitude of the worshipper, or – more frequently in Miłosz's work – the attitude of the student.

The third part of *This* is devoted to poets and other authors. Poets should not be singled out, despite the fact that matters of poetry are also discussed here. Miłosz talks about what he owes to others and, once again, recapitulates the points he disagrees with them about. It is his second most important dialogue with other writers after *A Treatise* but one very different from the latter. Its basic diction, natural and “practical,” is modified here in several ways, from the pathos of an ode to the sarcasm of a pamphlet.

Mickiewicz is the first to make appearance. He was the one taught by the fate that it's enough to:

Put two words together, and here they come running,  
Grab you to take you to the tribal rite.  
Let us write for ourselves, for a handful of friends,  
Just to while away a Sunday picnic:  
This is how it starts. And before you know it there are flags,  
Screams, prophesies, defending barricades  
...  
How diabolical must be the nature of language  
If one can only become its servant!

(„Ze szkodą” (To the Detriment))

I learned, says Miłosz, not only from Mickiewicz's great and right accomplishments but also from his mistakes. But he always remains “my great patron,” the first one to summon. In him is the lesson and the warning.

I, too, did harm, perhaps less than others.  
In disguise, wearing masks, unrecognizable,  
Ambiguous. Even this is protection  
Against recitation at the yearly fete.

Iwaszkiewicz is invoked as the second. “Selecting Iwaszkiewicz's Poems for an Evening of His Poetry at the National Theater in Warsaw” (708)) is polemical about the previous poem („Ze szkodą”) and opens with a (hidden) allusion to the text Iwaszkiewicz published in *Twórczość* after Karol Wojtyła was elected Pope. Iwaszkiewicz wondered how Mickiewicz and Słowacki would have reacted to the news of the election of a Pole who knew their work by heart and who once played Samuel Zborowski on stage. While repairing the evening of Iwaszkiewicz's poetry,

Miłosz was aware that Iwaszkiewicz was a poet prone to succumb “to the temptation, deeply sweet, of relief through nonexistence.” And Miłosz says without irony: “I too felt the seriousness of my duty.” He wants to bring out Iwaszkiewicz’s tone, “Despite your doubts, that tone of depths,” which – as every tone of depth in poetry – is *eo ipso* an affirmation of existence. He wants to extract from Iwaszkiewicz’s work “speech of generation, a home and fortress...the colors and scents of the steppe in bloom.”

“Ode for the Eightieth Birthday of John Paul II” is introduced by the two previously discussed poems. The recipient of the ode is an embodied holiness. Holiness has a triple meaning here: denotative (in the title: Holy Father), personal (he is a holy man) and numinous (through him acts God’s Holy Power). If the tradition of prophetic Polish Romanticism contributed to this triple holiness, it fulfilled its great task. Perhaps, then, the weakness or the strength of our romantic tradition depend on the qualities of its followers?

You are with us and will be with us henceforth  
When the forces of chaos raise their voice  
And the owners of truth lock themselves in churches  
And only the doubters remain faithful  
Your portrait in our homes every day remind us  
How much one man can accomplish and how sainthood works (710)

He next summons Jeanne Hersch. Among the twelve rules, or commandments, of his philosopher friend not a single one is unimportant. “What I Learned from Jeanne Hersch” (711) complements what Miłosz said earlier in “Conversation with Jeanne” from *Provinces*. In “Conversation” he talks about being “dazzled by the emerald essence of the leaves” (543) being more important than philosophy, about the sense of freedom found in the vastness of nature. In “What I Learned,” the commandments, extracted from the writings and conversations with Jeanne Hersch, form a moral code, concluding with the following principle engendering optimism and courage: “

12. That in our lives we should not succumb to despair because of our errors and our sins for the past is never closed down and receives the meaning we give it by our subsequent acts” (712).

“Zdziechowski,” encrusted with quotations from professor Zdziechowski’s writing, opens in the first person and ends with rhythmical verses in the second, addressing the eponymous character. Zdziechowski’s pessimism led him nonetheless towards the redemptive faith in God, despite the omnipresence of evil and chaos, and towards seeking refuge in tradition. A thinker and a poet (in his role of a thinker) has to redeem. “Zdziechowski” is thus a poem that Miłosz’s philippic “Against the Poetry of Philip Larkin” (718). clearly corresponds with: “Suddenly Philip Larkin’s there/ Explaining why all life is hateful./ I don’t see why I should be grateful.”

My dear Larkin, I understand  
That death will not miss anyone.

But this is not a decent theme  
For either an elegy or an ode.

(718)

The rhymed ending (of the Polish version) introduces irony to the poem, weakening the deriding tone, also hinting at auto-irony.

This part of the volume includes other poems, “Aleksander Wat's Tie” and “To Robert Lowell,” as well as poems about two Polish poets: Zbigniew Herbert and Tadeusz Różewicz. I will briefly refer to the last two.

“On Poetry, Upon the Occasion of Many Telephone Calls after Zbigniew Herbert's Death” returns to the division that keeps tormenting Miłosz, the division between the carnal and the spiritual, the amoral nature and the moral sphere of God and humanity. Even though it seems that poetry should not – it does, for some reason, inhabit that which is earthly, dirty and sinful. Individualized in man, after his death it becomes identical with his individual soul that has left the body.

Liberated from the phantoms of psychosis  
from the screams of perishing tissue  
from the agony of the impaled one

It wanders through the world  
Forever, clear (724)

Poetry is thus important also for the non-earthly future of the poet.

To Różewicz who said that evil comes “from man/ always from man/ only from man” (726), Miłosz replies with his *leitmotif* saying that evil is, unfortunately, immanent in nature: “good nature and wicked man/ are romantic inventions.” He adds to this, however, by adding to the volume the last poem in this part, one that is a portrait and a definition, “Różewicz.”

he does not indulge  
in the frivolity of form  
in the comic abundance of human beliefs  
he wants to know for sure

he digs in black soil  
is both the spade and the mole cut in two by the spade (727)

The last two lines are a mystery and each attempt to shed light onto it must falsify it. Let us try to interpret them nonetheless: to “dig in black soul” means to search for something in nature, to farm the land and at the same time to hurt it. Różewicz does both, obeying the external force (the force of poetry), being its tool – the spade and at the same time the injured mole. What does one find digging in the ground? An earthworm or – precisely – a mole. The latter has already made an appearance

in Miłosz's poetry. In "A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto" (63), the mole was a guardian of the dead, a judge and a metaphysical riddle. In his poetry Różewicz injures himself – the mole with his poetry – both in the physical, earthly, and in its moral and metaphysical dimension. It is an extremely astute reading of the poems written by the author of "Bas-Relief" and "Always a Fragment."

In the linear order of Czesław Miłosz's poetry it is the last of his definitions of individual poets.



The material presented here allows one to draw several different conclusions. It can be interpreted using different keys.

First and foremost, other poets fill the space of poetry seen as a tradition – that is history. They appear in a diachrony, living in their allotted time, composing poems and leaving their texts behind. Among these poets there is also a place for the "I" standing for Czesław Miłosz, poet, born in Szejdzie, given a long but also limited moment in the history of Polish and international poetry. "I" am looking at myself from the outside, looking at my place as a place in the history of literature, at myself as one of the poets fulfilling their functions.

Secondly, they fill the space of poetry defined as my personal tradition. I organize this space arbitrarily to a degree, highlighting selected works of literature. I choose them and shuffle, or they shuffle themselves inside me, co-creating my internal landscape, not necessarily in chronological order although the order of history is present in me to the extent that other poets cannot abandon it entirely. I am the center of the system, not one of them but separate from them. I meet them but on my ground, on the ground of my personality and my poetry. My poetry, however, is not a single space governed by one causal subject. No, my poetry is divided into circles (let us stick for a while to this imprecise but convenient Dantean metaphor).

Those circles are arranged according to the enumeration included in the "Preface" to *A Treatise on Poetry*. In each there is an "I" and in each "others" appear. Mickiewicz, who is especially important for Miłosz, continues to re-emerge. The first circle is a circle of the world's revelation in an image. It is an epiphanic unveiling of the mystery, of being. It is experienced by the "I" directly and in the communion with other poets capable of experiencing it. With Mickiewicz, one of the greatest, perhaps the greatest among the Polish poets, who experienced and immortalized it in the language, or who experienced it through the language. Next, he opens (or rather closes) the circle of "Melody, daydream," equivocal but also necessary, specifically poetic (as the epiphanic circle does not require verse). In the second circle irrational powers are released as the speaker appears as a conjurer in its dual role. The third circle is a circle of thoughts: here Mickiewicz appears ambiguously as a wise man who managed to oppose the bourgeois and scientific *Land of Urlo* with a great force and as a demagogic usurper from *The Books and The Pilgrimage of the*

*Polish Nation* and *Vision of Priest Peter*. Finally, we enter the circle of satire, where Mickiewicz becomes its unequivocal object. There can be no doubt, however, that the summoned poet retains his personal identity in all those circles.

These are the circles of poetry as space in which “I” – the poet participates, a space that is a metonymy of the cultural space that I am a participant of and the language I write in. At the same time, introducing other poets into my poetry, I introduce them into my personal individual space, into my idiolect. It is where I meet them as master of this space. If history, cultural history and cultural history reflected in the language and shaping the language were the most immediate context elsewhere, here it is my life that becomes the context, and my biography. In this particular space it begins to matter whether I knew personally the poets I am summoning, and whether they are dead or alive. The ones I knew cannot be reduced to their poetry, even if I want to – they appear as real people meeting the real me, not just me as role of a poet or a reader. They appear in the present, because this is the time of lyrical poetry.

Whether it is the poetic space I participate in or poetic space that I own, I am never alone. I am always surrounded by others. And I know that it is very important that those other poets existing in my poetry exist in it differently than outside of it, differently than in essays, differently than in the history of literature or memories.

It seems that Czesław Miłosz had to, and has to, summon other poets, since their participation in his poetic world proves that poetry is not a phantom nor a temptation addressing man’s “worse side” – that it can go beyond the accidental, and that it can last.

Novels and essays serve but will not last  
One clear stanza can take more weight  
That a whole wagon of elaborate prose. (109)

*Translation: Anna Warso*

## Bogdana CARPENTER

### Ethical and Metaphysical Testimony in the Poetry of Zbigniew Herbert and Czesław Miłosz<sup>1</sup>

The concept of poetry as witness determines and defines the poetics of Czesław Miłosz and Zbigniew Herbert, two of the most important contemporary Polish poets. Both share a conviction that the poet's obligation is to give testimony to history. Miłosz speaks simply of "a task," explaining that he can fulfill his life only by "a public confession / Revealing a sham, my own and of my epoch" (259).<sup>2</sup> He wonders if this was the reason why he was saved by the Might "from bullets ripping up the sand." (586) Similarly, Zbigniew Herbert pronounces categorically:

you were saved not in order to live  
you have little time you must give testimony<sup>3</sup>

These seemingly similar statements, however, hide an important difference. It can be seen clearly in the verb modality: imperative in Herbert, conditional in Miłosz. For the author of "The Envoy of Mr. Cogito," bearing witness is an obligation not to be doubted or debated. The poem is a "message," its biblical diction and style gives it the force of a commandment. It also contains an explanation – the duty of faithful-

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<sup>1</sup> Presented at "La place du témoignage dans la littérature polonaise du XXe si cle." Paris, 2 April 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, all quotations from Miłosz are based on the translations published in *New and Collected Poems: 1931 - 2001* (Ecco, 2003), *The Witness of Poetry*. (Harvard University Press. 1984). All quotations from Herbert come from *The Collected Poems* (HarperCollins, 2008), or *The Collected Prose* (HarperCollins, 2010) referenced. (A.W.)

<sup>3</sup> "The Envoy of Mr. Cogito" trans. by Bogdana and John Carpenter. *Selected Poems of Zbigniew Herbert*. Oxford University Press (1977).



ness to those “betrayed at dawn” – and warns that the only reward to be expected will be the whip of laughter and murder on a garbage heap. This, however, is the only way to be admitted to the company of cold skulls: Gilgamesh, Hector, and Roland.

In other words, testimony assumes a sacrifice in the name of ideals such as honor and faithfulness above anything else, and the obligation to bear witness is closely tied to the idea of history perceived as suffering. In all his endeavors Herbert is accompanied by the memory of “those toppled in the dust” and the sense that he lives and speaks “for them.” Looking at Mona Lisa, after several trials, he does not forget about those who, like him, wanted to see the famous painting but did not make it: “they were all going to come / I’m alone” (171,) Standing on the Acropolis he recalls his deceased friends and imagines himself to be “a delegate or an ambassador of all those who did not make it.”(467, R) In “The Envoy of Mr. Cogito” he repeats “I was called — weren’t there better ones than I.” The ethical imperative of faithfulness to the victims of history pervades Herbert’s entire work and his idea of witness is inseparable from the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and Poland’s political situation. For the author of “Life,”

poetry is the sister of memory  
guards bodies in the wilderness  
poem’s murmurs are worth no more  
than the breath of others (111)

The idea of poetry as witness can be traced as far back as *Chord of Light*, Herbert’s most elegiac volume, shaped almost entirely by the war experience. It is also where the juxtaposition of the instinct of life and the moral obligation of fidelity to those who passed away appears for the first time.

life purls like blood  
Shadows softly melt  
let’s not let the fallen perish (6)

The lifeline that “surges forth overthrowing obstacles” is contrasted with the line of fidelity, helpless “like a cry in the night a river in the desert,” invisible to the eye but parting the tissue of muscles and entering the arteries “so that we might meet at night our dead.”(50) The same opposition returns in *Prologue* where the speaker buries the dead like the ancient Antigone, refusing to step into “life’s new stream” praised by the choir.

I swim upstream and they with me ...  
I must bring them to a dry place  
and pile the sand into a heap (224)<sup>44</sup>

From the very beginning the concept of the poet as witness bearer is accompanied by a sense of inadequacy of words and poetry confronted with the task: “too few

<sup>4</sup> The political context of the poem and its clear polemic with Miłosz were noted by several critics.

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strings / we need a chorus / a sea of laments / mountains' clamor / a rain of stones." (17) The desire for poetry to become an enduring "inscription," like Sanskrit or pyramid, remains unfulfilled:

Your vain words are a shadow's echo  
and a wind in empty stanzas' rooms  
Not for you to hallow fire with song  
you wither scattering to no purpose  
the languid flowers of pierced hands

(9)

The pronouncements of the duty to give testimony are accompanied by a repeated reproach of "the sin of forgetting":

I cannot find the title  
for a memory of you  
with a hand torn from the dark  
I move on the remains of faces

...  
living – despite  
living – against  
I reproach myself with the sin of forgetting

(6)

Surging from all sides, life and material reality of the external world blur the contour of the past and replace the memories of what used to be: "our hands won't pass on the shape of your hands / we let them go to waste touching common things" (6). Instead of portraying real presences, images of the past are without memory, like a mirror that reflects only the immediately given: "the city which stands on water / as smooth as mirror's memory" (8). In Warsaw, which after the uprising resembles a graveyard, the dead ask in vain for "a slight sign from above." (27) The living only care about their own survival, and the names of the dead turn into "a dried kernel" (29). Our duty is to remember them; it is an obligation that not only the poet ("cup your hands as if to hold a memory") (29), but also things such as a pebble or a chair, ceaselessly remind us of.

Duty to remember and to give witness concerns only victims. Herbert does not attempt to recreate places that were lost: Lvov, "vast sky of my neighborhood," the house that "knows all my escapes and my returns," "the house's gate latch," (28), thereby arguing against Miłosz's "The World." Each attempt to recall old places is a failure: "the ocean of flighty memory/ washes crumbles images...the view suddenly breaks off" (105). It is not only the failure of memory but also an awareness that the reality we talk about is irrevocably lost. "If I went back there/ I would probably not find...a single thing that belonged to us" (278). Once again, a lost city turns into a graveyard: "all that survived is a flagstone/ with a chalk circle" (278).

The formulation of poetry as witness reveals itself with the most clarity in Herbert's famous "The Envoy of Mr. Cogito," but it takes its full shape in the *Report from a Besieged City*, especially in the title poem of the volume, whose speaker – "too old to carry arms" – assumes the role of a chronicler. In both volumes the experience of war is intertwined with the experience of communism but, more importantly, their reference field is much broader than in the *Chord of Light*, including not only the Polish experience, but the experience of political terror in general. Herbert's obligation to bear witness to the victims is indeed rooted in the past 30 years of Polish history; it is the Polish community that he has in mind describing the opportunism of Utica citizens who "enroll in accelerated courses/ in falling to their knees" (330) and it is them that he contrasts with the "upright attitudes" identified as courage, truth, opposition to violence, defense of the "insulted and beaten" and fidelity to the moral imponderabilities. But Mr. Cogito's moral imperative is not directed only at the Polish reader. The need to know the exact number of those who have fallen does not only include victims of Polish history, but all victims in the history of mankind.

how many Greeks perished at Troy  
- we don't know

how to give the exact losses  
on both sides  
in the battle of Guagamela  
Agincourt  
Leipzig  
Kutno

(404)

Because of the date (1983) and the circumstances surrounding the publication of the *Report from the Besieged City*, and of the title poem in particular, the volume is frequently interpreted as a description of the political and social situation in Poland before and during the period of martial law (1981-1982). However, Poland and martial law never literally surface in the poems, a characteristic that distinguishes Herbert's witness from other testimonies and "reports" published in that period. His ability to frame current events in a broad historical structure lends his poetry a unique depth and range: each of the described facts reverberates with history and connects to the events of the past. As in a hall of mirrors, the events of 1981-82 reflect the situation of 1956, 1939, 1863, 1795 and further back in time to the beginnings of the Polish state. The task that Herbert's "chronicler" sets for himself grows bigger as he continues to write; little by little he becomes a chronicler of not only contemporary, but of the entire Polish history, and the siege that he describes turns out to have lasted longer than the martial law introduced by General Jaruzelski.

The image of history as a hall of mirrors functions on more than one level: it reflects the events along the vertical axis of time but also along the horizontal, geographical one. Even if the chronicler of the *Report* concentrates first and foremost on the history of Poland, he swiftly crosses the national boundary, setting parallels

between the Polish history and the history of other nations “who were touched by misfortune...defenders of Dalai Lama the Kurds the Afghans” (350). The text can be read, then, on two different planes, as a report on the current situation in Poland and/or as a report on the state of siege in general, of any country and in any moment in history. The range of Herbert’s historical vision shows already on the linguistic level, through a language that is intentionally symbolic, precise but at the same time generalizing. Each sentence, and frequently, entire poems, operates on three levels: first as a reference to the author’s experience and the experience of his time, secondly as an allusion to similar past situations, and thirdly as a declaration about an experience that is universal and goes beyond the specifically Polish context:

Monday: stores are empty a rat is now the unit of currency  
Tuesday: the Mayor has been killed by unknown assassins  
Wednesday: cease fire talks the enemy interned our envoys  
(416)

The choice of words breaks the narrow actuality of the poem while the language broadens its referential reality.

Bearing witness is doubly motivated for the author of the *Report*: it is a moral obligation to the victims of history on the one hand, and on the other, an attempt to write a different history, one that is usually unnoticed, or worse, ignored by professional historians. Herbert sees two faces of history one that it shows to the victims and another, shown to the rulers and “executioners.” To the latter history means power, crime and lies; for victims, the essence of history lies in suffering, humiliation and death. And it is in matters that involve victims that the historians are shamefully negligent.

a specter is haunting  
the map of history  
the specter of indeterminacy  
(404)

Faced with history unable to fulfill its task and bear witness, the poet is left with no other choice than to bear it himself. He accepts his role as a chronicler and “write(s) down – not knowing for whom – a siege’s history” (416).

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The problem of giving testimony is presented differently in Miłosz’s poetry. The author of “A Task” considers it in “fear and trembling,” aware that he lives in times when “pure and generous words” are forbidden (259). Hence the task of bearing witness, at least in Herbert’s understanding of the word, remains unfulfilled: “I said so little/ Days were short” he confesses (274). Elsewhere the speaker of the poem calls himself a “schemer,” different from those who give testimony remaining “indifferent to gunfire, hue and cry in the bushwood, and mockery” (345). He sees

his “task” elsewhere: “I protect my good name, for language is my measure.” (273). Both Miłosz’s poems appeared in *From the Rising of the Sun*, published in 1974, as was *Mr. Cogito*.

But it was also Miłosz who, among the first poets, “gave testimony” to his time in *Rescue*. “In Fever, 1939” mentions the killed children “from our street” and its echoes can be heard in Herbert’s *Chord of Light*.<sup>5</sup> Both “Campo di Fiori” and “A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto” are Holocaust testimonies, rare in Polish poetry, of the fate of Jewish victims, abandoned and condemned to oblivion. In “On the Death Of Tadeusz Borowski” he talks about “smoke over Birkenau”; “Prologue” outlines a tragic fate of an entire generation; “The Moral Treaty” (1947) remains one of the most important and one of the earliest testimonies of the impending Stalinist terror. And *Captive Mind*, *The Seizure of Power* and “A Treaty on Poetry” carry on the analysis of the political mechanisms of our century.

Further, in the academic year 1980/81 Miłosz also delivered a series of lecture at Harvard University, poignantly titled *The Witness of Poetry*, admitting that with other poets from Eastern Europe, he sought to find in poetry “witness and a participant in one of mankind’s major transformations” (4). Miłosz is aware that “posterity will read us in an attempt to comprehend what the twentieth century was like” (11). He devotes one of the lectures, “Ruins and Poetry,” to poets who gave testimony to their era and the experience of war in particular – a collective experience for Polish society as a whole – not only sympathizing, but actually identifying with those poets. Until the mid-80s, English and American criticism tended to read his work mostly through a political and historical lens, reducing it – wrongly and unjustly – to witness literature<sup>6</sup> and Miłosz himself claims testimony to be a constitutive part of a literary fact, and literature – as it transcends the message delivered by the press and television – a “more reliable witness than journalism” (16).

Why, then, does he use a conditional in “A Task”? Why does he call himself a schemer in “Not This Way,” cutting himself off from those who give testimony? It is because in the three decades after WWII his stance on the question of witness evolved. Miłosz changed his mind regarding both poetry as witness and the very concept of witness. In his famous essay “Szlachetność, niestety” (“Nobility, unfortunately”) published in “Kultura” (Paris, 1983) he warns against the kind of poetry which – in an attempt to fulfill the moral obligation of witness – situates itself too close to a political document and transforms into propagandistic journalism.<sup>7</sup> Miłosz’s paradigmatic witness-poem, “Sarajevo,” written in the late 90s importantly includes a remark that denies it a poetic status: “Perhaps this is not a poem but at least I say what I feel” (610). and his work evolves increasingly towards the existential experience, abandoning not only politics, but history as well.

<sup>5</sup> “the children from our street / met with a very hard death.” “Three Poems By Heart” (7)

<sup>6</sup> See: „Recepcja poezji Czesława Miłosza w Ameryce,” *Teksty drugie*. Vol. 3-4. 2001. 99-114.

<sup>7</sup> *Eseje*. Warszawa. 2000. 121-126.

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Wind covered the signs with snow  
The earth took in the screams  
No one anymore remembers  
How and when it occurred

(581)

History fades away, only “the sumptuous, golden verse” lasts.<sup>8</sup>

Which is not to say that Miłosz rejected the concept of witness. Instead, he changed its contents, hallowing it out and assigned new meaning to it. “A task,” or witness, no longer aims to uncover the lies of one’s time and the suffering of its victims, nor is it to be understood as a moral duty of revealing the truth of a historical and political reality, as the author of the *Report from a Besieged City* proceeds to; the “task” is to give testimony to the entire “unattainable” reality, both historical and existential, collective and individual, past and present, to all that which was and will be. Rejection present in the act of witness performed by Herbert, and the majority of contemporary poets, turns into validation, negation into affirmation, and testimony becomes a conviction. Seen in these terms it is an affirmation of reality as a fact, a *fait accompli* and positive.<sup>9</sup>

Miłosz also proposes a different idea of a poet. He is no longer a chronicler or historical reality, such as the author of the *Report*, but a “secretary” of an unknown power:

I am no more than a secretary of the invisible thing  
That is dictated to me and a few others.  
Secretaries, mutually unknown, we walk the earth  
Without much comprehension. Beginning a phrase in the middle,  
Or ending it with a comma. And how it all looks when completed  
Is not up to us to inquire, we won’t read it anyway.

(343)

In contrast to Mr. Cogito, who follows the ethical imperative that he is both the sender and the recipient of, the “secretary” fulfills the intentions of an external

<sup>8</sup> The evolution of the concept of witness in Miłosz has several reasons, the most obvious of which, though not necessarily the most important one, is his emigration, in other words, a forced removal from one’s own community, its historical experience and a long stay in the United States, where until recently the beating pulse of history was less strongly pronounced. *Visions from San Francisco Bay* and poems written during the first decade of his stay in America are an attempt at facing American ahistoricity. Compared to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the second one is undeniably marked by a certain “slowing down” of history, which lead one of the American historians to a rather haphazard pronouncement of the “end of history” (F. Fukuyama, *The End of History*, “National Interest”, Summer 1989). What is crucial, though, is the internal dynamic of this poetry whose existential dimensions coexists from the very start with an immersion in history and politics. Evolution should be understood then in terms of a shift, or a change in proportion.

<sup>9</sup> Marian Stala believes the shift from negation to affirmation to be one of the “most fundamental structures” in Miłosz’s sense of the world. (*Trzy nieskończoności*. Kraków 2001.126)

force: "All my life I have been in the power of a daimonion, and how the poems dictated by him came into being I do not quite understand" (3).<sup>10</sup> The idea of giving testimony remains a part of the "secretarial" duty aiming to "transpose what was felt into a magical register," except for Miłosz the "sensation" implies a totality of experience – "as many colors, tastes, sounds and smells" (687) – and not only what is believed to be history.

*Cogitare* of Mr. Cogito does not attempt to affirm existence; his meditation does not lead to an affirmation of reality but to an ethical conclusion: the duty of faithfulness even at the cost of one's own life, "Be faithful. Go." Faithful not to existence but to non-existence, to ashes and ruins, to the symbolic Troy and her fallen defenders. Herbert's poetic witness stays in the shadow of the dead. Should we imagine Mr. Cogito as a product of Miłosz's creative mind, *cogitare* would instead lead to an affirmation of existence, to *sum* and *esse*, as one the title of one of his poems suggests. The act of creation opposes that which is destructive and is an attempt to overcome death. "To find my home in one sentence, concise, as if hammered in metal. Not to enchant anybody. Not to earn a lasting name in posterity. An unnamed need for order, for rhythm, for form, which three words are opposed to chaos and nothingness" (453). Poetry becomes a warrant of survival: "I cast a spell on the city, asking it to last" (425). This new concept of witness and poetry seen as "a passionate pursuit of the Real" determines the poetic of the author of *Unattainable Earth*, a poetic in which the word tries to move as close as it is possible to the described object, replacing the *signifiant* with the *signifié*: "When poets discover that their words refer only to words and not to a reality which must be described as faithfully as possible, they despair" but "the never-fulfilled desire to achieve a mimesis...makes for the health of poetry" (49, 56).

Hence the strong presence of description in Miłosz's poetry, his interest with the poetry of the East and his *haiku* anthology where, as in his own poems, "savoring every detail of the visible matter" refers the reader "to something other than just words and images" (7-9).<sup>11</sup> Description is the witness of existence as reality made permanent by the poetic word confirms existence. Seen as a rebellion against non-existence witness acquires a new, metaphysical dimension: *Mimesis* is not only a matter of style, but – first and foremost – a worldview proclaiming the existence of "objective reality" that "can be seen as it is" (73). Thus, each detail, such as the polka-dot dress or pearls on the belt of Venetian courtesans, acquires new importance. It is the detail – seen, heard, felt and remembered – that lends credence to the act of witness, becoming irrefutable proof of the truth of relation, and of truth as such. Also, a proof of existence, as with every word the presence of "entire human lives" is felt (73). Naming, the very core of poetic act, re-enacts the divine act of creation and being its highest praise at the same time. The chance

<sup>10</sup> Two decades later his "Report" opens with an apostrophe to God: "O Most High, you willed to create me a poet and now it is time for me to present a report" (589).

<sup>11</sup> Miłosz, Czesław. "Introduction." *Haiku*. Wydawnictwo M: Kraków. 1992.

to confirm existence is a moment of joyous triumph, and poetry as witness of existence is a poetry of hope.

The metaphysical concept of witness manifests itself also in the “resurrection” of that which no longer is but which used to be with the use of poetic word. “Resurrection” through poetry is yet another form of rebellion and a remedy for the relentless law of biology that sees man as an integral part of nature and “changes [him] into a statistical cipher.” [46, W] Poetry becomes a savior “from what is cold as two by two is four” [51, W] and poetic word has magical powers to extend existence beyond its own limits. Like a crystal, it encapsulates existence, becoming “home” for those who died long ago. [738 CP]

The only proof of the existence of Miss X  
Is my writing. As long as I am here  
She lives not far from the places she loved  
(594)

As Marek Zaleski rightly observes, Miłosz’s constant revisiting of his homeland and Vilnius are more than a symptom of nostalgia, they are a “symbol of transcendence” and “a rite of redemption.”<sup>12</sup> Remembered images express disagreement with the order of this world, a rebellion against “the earthly law that sentences memory to extinction” (588), an attempt to push against the “stone wall” (644).

The poetry of the conviction of reality is not an attempt to escape history. Historical experience, including the experiences of WWII and communism, crucial for Herbert and contemporary Polish writers, is not – despite the initial impression – absent from the concept of witness suggested by Miłosz, fundamentally shaped by those experiences. No less than the author of “To Marcus Aurelius” is Miłosz branded by history and its cruelty: “For since I opened my eyes I have seen only the glow of fires, massacres” (59). He, too, gives testimony to those who have died. However, siding with life, Miłosz defines the role of witness differently than Herbert who sees “evil” as “embodied evil, always *with a human face*” (635 emphasis mine).

The cruelty of war, totalitarian systems, and the deaths of millions, do not conceal the truth about the tragic fate of the individual – whose existence always ends in death. Death caused by political systems remains only a part of evil of human death as such. This is why the author of *ABC* is not concerned with the status of those he resurrects in his poems, be it a maid, Paulina, or two sisters, Anna and Dora Drużyno, “old women, defenseless against historical time, and simply time itself” whose names “no one but me remembers.” Each evoked character is a part of a larger order: a testimony to their existence is thus a testimony to existence as such, *pars pro toto*.<sup>13</sup> Historicity does not manifest itself only through large events “in the form of

<sup>12</sup> M. Zaleski *Formy pamięci*. Warsaw, 1996. 28-31.

<sup>13</sup> Reminding of the existence of the ordinary and the forgotten is also a form of rebellion against the political totalitarianisms of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which categorized human beings into better and worse races, judged them by their social standing, and equated with flies and cockroaches. (52)



fire falling from the sky, invasions by foreign armies, or ruined cities” but also “in a detail of architecture, in the shaping of a landscape” (4). In Miłosz, the meaning of testimony takes a broad sense because it encompasses the whole reality, including spiritual reality that exists almost subcutaneously in the tissue of every epoch, as it stems from the conviction that “a purely historical dimension does not exist because it is at the same time a metaphysical dimension...there is a metaphysical warp and woof in the very fabric of history” (71).

To sum up: the concept of testimony as seen by the author of the *Report from a Besieged City* corresponds to the convention of the literature of testimony adapted and set for the post-war Polish literature. Among Polish writers, as Miłosz rightly observes, Herbert conveys the collective experience of his generation and of Polish society after 1945 with the most faithfulness.<sup>14</sup> He also manages to endow his experience, and consequently his testimony, with universal range and meaning. Miłosz himself breaks the paradigm that he co-created in the 40s, demarcating, not for the first time, new tracks and grounds for Polish poetry. The interest in metaphysical poetry noticeable in the last few years among young poets and critics is proof that the author of *Theological Treatise* remains a faithful – and an unmatched – witness not only to his own time.

*Translation: Anna Warso*

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<sup>14</sup> In: *Polish Postwar Poetry*. Berkeley, 1983. 121.

## Anna NASIŁOWSKA

### Female Identity in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Polish Poetry: Between Androgyny and Essentialism.<sup>1</sup>

Although discussing female identity in poetry necessarily involves theory, the main aim of this essay is to propose fresh readings and new interpretations of literary texts. The achievements of 20<sup>th</sup> century feminism range from new reflections on gender and developments in psychoanalytical theory to a denouncement of the patriarchal order that results in a phallogocentric dominance of one gender in language. One cannot speak, however, of a unitary approach: the very the notion of female identity as such is sometimes questioned – both by feminist thought and by postmodern philosophy – of the subject which rejects the idea of a fixed, essentialist Self. Distinguishing a “female identity” could thus be seen as an element of gender politics.<sup>2</sup> Doubts regarding female identity resurface also in the psychoanalytical tradition, especially in its Lacanian incarnation that assumes the existence of one (male) identity in the Symbolic order and perceives “womanhood” as a “lack.”<sup>3</sup> This approach, re-interpreted and adapted by Julia Kristeva, is not necessarily misogynist.

I will treat the existing body of feminist texts as a point of reference offering several theories of identities, as to speak of a single “identity” would be normative and restrictive in itself, possibly also contradictory to the internal logic of self-definition inscribed in the discussed literary texts. Feminism embraces varied

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<sup>1</sup> The following essay expands on the presentation given at the 32<sup>th</sup> Theoretical-Literary Conference organized by Uniwersytet Jagielloński and Institute of Literary Research in Janowice, September 2003.

<sup>2</sup> J. Butler *Gender trouble. Feminism and Subversion of Identity*, London, New York 1990.

<sup>3</sup> P. Dybel „Refleksje wokół diagramu różnicy seksualnej Jacquesa Lacana.” [Reflecting on Lacan’s diagram of sexual difference] *Krytyka feministyczna. Siostra teorii i historii literatury*. G. Borkowska, L. Sikorska (eds.) Warszawa, 2000. 30-42.

theoretical concepts of womanhood: from the one that posits it as a heterogeneous element in constant motion, as a “happening” identity, not always present and never finalized that emerges from Kristeva’s writing<sup>4</sup> to the utopian *écriture féminine* inspired by Hélène Cixous.<sup>5</sup> The latter also posits the need to view the female voice as revolutionary and transgressive, one that establishes its own order and subverts heterosexual dominance. I do not aim to present the full range of theoretical writing on female identity in an article as short as this. Instead, I would like to designate within it a possibly broad field of differences or, perhaps even, contradictions, which is also what dictated my choice of literary texts that exemplify certain extremes or verbalize the problem and present its internal tensions.

## Iłakowiczówna the poet

Who was Iłakowiczówna? In the minds of her readers she was or is first and foremost a poet. But there were other determinants of her existence and fate, and her textual auto-creations include areas of non-identity that need to be talked about. Even my opening claim – that she “was a poet” [“poetka”, *fem. sg.*]<sup>6</sup> – must be taken with reservation. Anatol Stern, for instance, referencing Iłakowiczówna in one of his critical essays, referred to her using the male form of “poet.” Stern says: “Our country has been fortunate with poets [*fem. pl.*]. This goes as far back as to Urszula Kochanowska.... Our country has also been fortunate with poets [*male. pl.*] that were female, such as Maria Pawlikowska, Kazimiera Iłakowiczówna and others”<sup>7</sup> – Stern proceeds to discuss a volume of poetry by another author, forgotten today, whom he believes to deserve a place in our memory. Many years later Michał Głowiński used a similar critical concept referring to the work of Wisława Szymborska on the day she was awarded honorary doctorate by Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. Głowiński also felt the need to comment on his decision to use the masculine:

<sup>4</sup> J. Bator „Julia Kristeva – kobieta i symboliczna rewolucja.” [Julia Kristeva – woman and symbolica revolution] *Teksty Drugie*. 2000 Vol. 6.

<sup>5</sup> *The Laugh of the Medusa*. Cixous also believed that breaking the dominance is tied also to the avant-garde literary practice and in this spirit interpreted the writing of Genet and Joyce. See also: H. Cixous *Prénoms du personnage*, Paris 1974; H. Cixous *Entre l'Écriture Des Femmes*, Paris 1986; T. Moi *Hélène Cixous: An Imaginary Utopia*, w: *Sexual/Textual Politics, Feminist Literary Theory*, London and New York 1987. 102-125.

<sup>6</sup> The vast majority of Polish nouns are gendered: English “poet” translates thus to Polish as both “poetka” (*fem. sg. nom.*) or “poeta” (*masc. sg. nom.*); introducing Iłakowiczówna in the opening paragraph (“she was or is first and foremost a poet”) Nasiłowska uses the female form “była ... poetką.” [*fem. sg. instrum.*] For future reference it will be important to mention that also the poet’s surname is gendered with the fem. ending “-ówna,” a practice common in her day. (AW)

<sup>7</sup> A. Stern „Poezja młodych.” *Głód jednoznaczności i inne szkice*, Warszawa 1972.139. (ZN) Stern uses the female form [„poetek” *pl. genitive*] in the first sentence, and in the second part he speaks of “women-poets” [“-poetów” *masc., pl., genitive*]. In Polish: „Kraj nasz ma szczęście do poetek. [...] Kraj nasz ma szczęście również do kobiet-poetów, takich jak Maria Pawlikowska, Kazimiera Iłakowiczówna i inne.” (AW)

I am doing this because our language endowed the male form with the privilege of generality. Using the feminine to say that she is a “great poet” [poetka, *fem. sg.*] I would suggest, despite my intentions, that she is superior among female poets and such restriction would be very much out of place here. “Poeta” [*masc. sg.*] describes everyone devoted to creating poetry, regardless of gender and it is, thus, universal.<sup>8</sup>

Both Stern and Głowiński use the masculine as a compliment whose wording is one of the *loci communes* of literary criticism, a popular device used to show appreciation..

Reading Iłakowiczówna’s early writing, one discovers that the hesitation regarding her status as a “poetka” or “poeta” was inscribed in her first poetic attempts. Her first volume, *Ikarowe loty* [Icarian Flights] was published in 1912 in Cracow under the name I.K. Iłakowicz [devoid of the *fem.* ending]. A year later she found herself in a guest house in Zakopane where, as a result of her recent literary success, she was seated at the table next to Stefan Żeromski whose work she passionately read. Noticing a young person Żeromski started a small talk asking initially about “skies and bobsleighs.” As none of the topics worked, the company at the table hinted that the young lady wrote and even published literature.

“So, are you by any chance related to...” he asked hesitantly.

“Yes, yes” I interrupted knowing what was coming and said “Actually, not related. I wrote those poems myself.”

The face of my great neighbor went dark, slowly turning to stone, his eyes lost interest and kindness.

“Dear God” he said flatly „I.K.Iłakowicz is a woman!”

He turned away and never looked at me again.<sup>9</sup>

Iłakowiczówna never commented on this anecdote. She referenced it again only once, in passing and ironically: “Since I had the same name as the ‘young, incredibly gifted Iłakowicz,’ I became the center of attention.”<sup>10</sup>

In defense of Stefan Żeromski, who was unable to cope gracefully with the social confusion, one should add that indeed from the poems collected in *Ikarowe loty* there emerges a male persona of the “young, incredibly gifted Iłakowicz.” Nine of the poems use past tense verb forms indicating a male speaker, seven poems use female forms. The remaining ones (constituting a majority) can be interpreted both ways: some echoing poems by male authors, and others – those traditionally attributed to the female utterance – are exemplified by lullaby or folk-inspired fairy-tale.

The construction of the book seems to imply that the male forms will prevail while the female remain a lyrical role, a series of poetic incarnations of the “unbelievably sensitive Iłakowicz.” It opens with a series of program lyrics, or a *Weltanschauung*

<sup>8</sup> In: „Radość czytania Szymborskiej.” *Wybór szkiców krytycznych* red. S. Balbus, D. Wojda (eds.) Kraków 1996. 46.

<sup>9</sup> K. Iłakowiczówna *Trzyemeński zając*, Kraków 1968. 89.

<sup>10</sup> K. Iłakowiczówna *O muzyce i Szymanowskim*, w: *Wspomnienia i reportaże*. Warszawa 1997. 179.

declaration. Such is the message of the title poem, "Ikarowe loty" [Icarian Flights] proclaiming a liberation of the human spirit, a will to power, and a cult of heroism.

And so my life is laughing at me today:  
I thought that I would fall, broken down by yearning  
That I will be dragging my shattered wings through dust!<sup>11</sup>

Masculine verb forms („bom sądził” i „będę włókl”) are used for the first time in the fourth stanza of the five but from the very beginning the poem exhibits features tied to the male cultural pattern that could be interpreted as signaling masculinity, as well as clear literary reminiscences of Leopold Staff's will of power from *Sny o potęgze* [Dreams of Power] (1901) and Mickiewicz's "Ode to Youth." The latter echoes even more loudly in the second poem of the volume, "Bunt młodości" [Rebellion of the Youth] and lyrics that follow further add to the constructed image of the speaking subject who declares the end of melancholy and praises rebellion, transforming into Icarus, Pilgrim and Samson, someone feeling a strong bond with their generation and ready to meet the demands of heroism, including a possible participation in the patriotic goals. Such a declaration on the eve of the Great War seemed very timely. The sense of community is expressed through the repetitive use of the plural "we" and certainly implies a collective willingness to fight: in other words, military preparedness. At the same time, the speaker is very much aware of the spiritual dilemmas of the recent past, which in turn are associated with the female word "soul." The lyrical tension is born between the soul whose weakness needs to be overcome and the spirit, declarations of power, and the willingness to act in the real world. Poems such as these foreshadowed, in a way, the activism and vitality of the Skamander group. Tortured wombs, angels, graves, funerals and souls are all part of the symbolic inheritance, re-evaluated with the thought of a brighter, heroic future. It is not until the seventh poem in the volume, "Tęsknota do życia" [A Longing for Life] that the feminine forms appear, but the verse itself is stylized into a fairy-tale. Its speaker is a "shadow of a princess" who, "clad in stolen radiance" and suspended between life and illusion, dreams the dream of a soul. The dream, too, ends with a victory of life.

This is followed by a thematically linked series centered around the confession of a lover. He awaits death in the arms of his beloved („Półsen" [Half-asleep]), dreams of the dead („Umarła panienka ukazuje się spoczywającemu" ["Dead Girl Appears to the Dreamer]), yearns, sings to a rose, and becomes a poor prince. Here, however, following a few clearly distinct poems, returns the fairy-tale character: in the song of the orphan, in the lament of the sick and the cycle in which those poems are included is titled "Shadows," immediately suggesting role-playing which allows to move freely between masculinity and femininity. Similarly, in the succeeding three cycles, male and female voices are treated interchangeably.

<sup>11</sup> K. Iłakowiczówna „Ikarowe loty.” *Poezje zebrane*. [Icarian Flights. Collected Poems] J. Biesiada, A. Żurawska-Włoszczyńska (eds.), Toruń 1999 Vol.1. p. 23. (Here trans. by AW)

The femininity of the speaker is clearly marked only as late as in “Pieśń o lesie” [Song of the Forest] – the last, very extensive poem of the volume, dated 1908, and which is rich in biographical references. They appear, however, only in the fourth part of the poem that itself could be seen as speaking in several voices. Earlier passages speak of sadness, include a poetic description of a forest, and then the so called aetiological history – a kind of legendary-mythical genesis of a forest lake followed by a reference to Leon Plater’s death in the January Uprising. Only in the last part does the poem mention wild bellflowers, the mother’s favorite flowers, whose language the poor and orphaned (the feminine form of the adjectives clearly indicates a woman) cannot understand.

While markers of femininity are not given prime importance in the volume, poems utilizing male subjectivity and referencing traditionally masculine gender characteristics do not exhibit features found in the poetry of mask or role-playing – they use the confession of strong internal emotionality referring to the undefined (as it is internalized) male “I” translated to “us” that is not given a clear personal construction. Reading it as a role-playing would necessitate referencing other than textual knowledge of the author’s gender, which in turn, seems too big of a shortcut.

### Iłakowicz the feminist

Before one begins to attribute masculinity to Iłakowicz, more needs to be said about the poet herself. Already around the time of her literary debut her feminist consciousness was uniquely developed. She received an education in Cracow, and earlier, in England. We know little about her studies in Oxford, where her time was probably largely spent on overcoming the language barrier. Later (in 1908, it is unclear for how long precisely) she studied at a London school for women located on Church Street and lead by an Irishwoman, Mme D’Esterre, called Amica. The school was actually a kind of women phalanstery whose life was organized around intellectual pursuits; it followed a strictly vegetarian diet and inhabiting students (foreigners and girls from poorer families) did not pay tuition but had to help with housework. They wore uniforms resembling togas and small round caps that provoked the curiosity of onlookers but solved the problem of buying clothes. Tuition fees were obligatory only for the non-inhabiting students, among them wives of Members of Parliament, ministers, and Anglican clergy.

The curriculum of the house of “Simple Life” included what today would be called courses in rhetoric and literature (English, French and German). It emphasized the importance of practical skills such as discussion, argumentation, presenting and defending one’s opinion, the preparation of speeches, and public speaking. These were trained during actual discussions and presentations on various abstract subjects.<sup>12</sup> It seems that Iłakowiczówna utilized the skills acquired in London in the 1920’s and 30’s while preparing speeches commissioned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs aimed at winning support for the Polish cause abroad and presenting the

<sup>12</sup> K. Iłakowiczówna *Trazymeński zając*, s. 40-44.

moral aspects of the Poland's political position. She presented one of the texts for editing to her already seventy-five year-old teacher, offering remuneration. Amica, however, was moved by what she read and refused to accept the money. The speeches were indeed riveting in their literary character, as evidenced by "Jak to się dzieje, że nasi nieprzyjaciele naprawdę godni są miłości" [How It Is Possible That Our Enemies Truly Deserve Love] presented in 1934 in Geneva, Prague, and Copenhagen. It supported the idea of "moral disarmament" advocated by the Polish diplomacy with the hope of avoiding the conflict that later developed into WWII. In her speech, Iłakowiczówna did not reach for political or moral arguments (like those resulting from the Christian ethic) but presented her own, very individualistic vision relying on personal and poetic experience.<sup>13</sup>

During her stay in England at a young age she also became familiar with the work of Pankhurst women, and participated in the distribution of suffragist brochures and newsletters herself. She sold them in London, which was not safe and could have resulted in strict police sanctions.<sup>14</sup> It also led to a conflict with the independence activist Marian Dąbrowski, who Polish literary theory knows as the husband of Maria Dąbrowska (the author of *Noce i dnie*), and who believed feminism to be harmful and contrary to the goals of Polish independence.

The practicing of patriotism was for Iłakowiczówna also an occasion to cross the boundaries of traditional gender roles. Already as a child, reading Sienkiewicz's *The Trilogy*, she identified with the protagonists: "*I was Bohun, I was Kmicic.*"<sup>15</sup> In the fervent atmosphere of preparation for military action she wrote a letter from London to Józef Piłsudski, whom she knew personally, offering her services as *aide-de-camp*. For this purpose she also enrolled in a shooting course and had some success until she was asked to shoot live pigeons. Iłakowiczówna refused dryly, informing her instructor that since the Muscovites did not fly, she saw no point in killing innocent birds. Raised by the Plater family (after her mother's death she was under the care of Zofia Plater-Zyberkowska), the poet must have remembered the history of Emilia Plater. In Liksna upon Dźwina she was shown the place where Emilia, as a child, was believed to have kept a flower garden. The family of the heroine, however, was full of reservation regarding her activities – Iłakowiczówna quotes one of the aunts:

"Because she went into the woods with a gun and caused a lot of trouble to those gentlemen... Imagine how embarrassing it must have been for them!"<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Text based on the version printed in Polish in the Polish press. In: *Wspomnienia i reportaże*. 28-54.

<sup>14</sup> K. Iłakowiczówna *Ścieżka obok drogi*, Warszawa 1939. 39-41. Emmeline and her daughter, Christabel Pankhurst fought for the voting rights of women, attempting first to put the matter of the vote on the Parliament agenda. Since 1905, they were deeply conflicted with the police authorities, the fight for the suffragist cause entailed the loss of life among protesting women.

<sup>15</sup> K. Iłakowiczówna *Niewczesne wynurzenia*. Warszawa 1958. 232.

<sup>16</sup> K. Iłakowiczówna *Trazymeński zajac*. 15.

Piłsudski rejected the offer but wrote back, explaining that women cannot serve in the army except for performing auxiliary tasks, he added, however, that there exist no boundaries that a strong and persevering individual could not overcome.<sup>17</sup> Iłakowiczówna tore his long letter to pieces, taking offense for several years. In January 1915, she began service in a Polish medical unit in the Russian army. Working as a nurse during an epidemic she fell very ill and experienced religious conversion.

Her regained religious faith never changed Iłakowiczówna's attitude towards feminism. In the memoirs of the interwar period she repeatedly returns to her experiences as a professionally active, independent woman, a free one as well – that is, not tied to a man. She was one of the very few women given independent positions in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which often led to problems that she reminisces about in her memoirs. Doubts were expressed, for instance, whether a woman could serve as a diplomatic courier. Once she won the position, the poet was handed heavy parcels and offered no help nor protection. After one of the parcels was opened in the Polish embassy in Berlin, it turned out that it contained a sizeable ham sent as a gift to the ambassador. She remained in touch with European feminist organizations and several of her lectures promoting Poland were organized by local groups of educated women, which proved particularly fruitful in the Balkans. She always emphasized the special nature of these contacts and the unbelievable ability of women to overcome organizational difficulties and prejudice, resulting from their non-traditional attitudes.<sup>18</sup>

Her dream of serving Piłsudski as an aide was fulfilled, although differently than expected, after the May Coup d'État when she accepted, not without hesitation, the position and title of "Secretary of the Minister of Military Affairs." She believed the role to be difficult, bureaucratic and burdensome. It involved, she says in *Ścieżka obok drogi*, answering letters in Marshall's name so that he would not have to deal with this particular task personally. Those included pleas for help, complaints about local authorities, pleas for financial support, and which came in the thousands every month. She was the only woman in a company of men, military men, who were often hostile to her, and generally biased against women. Addressing her nieces in the memoirs she offered advice on overcoming the reluctance of male colleagues.

I do not know if in the future women are going to work in offices, and if they are, if they are going to have to fight against their colleagues' instinctive hostility towards their very presence in their place of work, and on equal footing, as we do today. But should nothing change in this respect, you must remember that the woman's greatest enemy is not her biased colleague but her own nervousness. If persecution mania is allowed to develop along with a sense of martyrdom, if your good mood is lost, you have just defeated yourself. Nothing will save you then.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> K. Iłakowiczówna *Ścieżka obok drogi*, s. 41, jest to omówienie zapamiętanego tekstu, nie cytat.

<sup>18</sup> See remarks on women in Bulgaria and Romania in: *Wspomnienia i reportaże*.

<sup>19</sup> K. Iłakowiczówna *Ścieżka obok drogi*. 234.



Today, we would say that she was a victim of gender discrimination. By fulfilling a public function Iłakowiczówna was also very aware of the customary social expectations regarding clothes (day suit, afternoon dress, evening gown), hairstyle (obligatory permanent weave, regular visits to the salon), or hats (one does not appear bareheaded in public). She argued with a tailor who suggested a dress she deemed too short, believing that her position required a classical style rather than a slavish adherence to current fashion. She always traveled with several suitcases and a hat box. In other words, she did not shun purely extrinsic forms tied to the notion of womanhood, public position, norms of conduct, and the fact of representation. In the moments when the issue resurfaces one glimpses clear signs of a narcissistic satisfaction resulting from successfully meeting particularly strict demands, or – on the contrary – signs of narcissistic anxiety regarding those demands. During the making of a documentary on people surrounding Marshall Piłsudski, she was unhappy with her old, patched dress and unfavorable appearance: “My chin extended from shoulders to the lips and I looked like Tsarina Catherine II in the last years of her rule.”<sup>20</sup> Such complaints are typical of a woman anxious about her appearance and subjecting herself to harsh self-control. As a writer she can compensate the anxiety with self-irony, but she does not negate the constant care for external form and a sense of dependence on external evaluation.

## Androgyne and the child

In the tale of Iłakowiczówna meanings first seem inclined towards masculinity only to indicate femininity later on. Interpretations alluding to gender identity disorders should be rejected, however, as relying on open and ungrounded psychologism. I will add only that in my use of biographical material I refer exclusively to Iłakowiczówna’s own written testimony, remaining within the scope of her point of view.

Her identity seems to present itself as an unsolvable riddle, a paradox, but nothing justifies a potential claim that we are dealing with something dangerous or pathological. It is not an act of transgression, nor a case of gender disorder – as it was with Maria Komornicka.

One could definitely say that as much as there are attempts in contemporary Polish feminism to enforce the policy of using female forms to refer to professions and functions exercised by women, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century feminist consciousness entailed a fight for the right to use the masculine to refer to women. Grammatical forms are often ideologized, as evidenced by Dennis Baron in *Grammar and Gender*.<sup>21</sup> And so, today one will meet women referring to themselves using the feminine forms of professions such as literary critic, historian of ideas, anthropologist, or sociologist. Meanwhile, Iłakowiczówna used the masculine when she said was a minister’s secretary, diplomatic courier, civil servant – and she wanted to be

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, 175.

<sup>21</sup> D. Baron *Grammar and Gender*, New Haven and London 1986.

an aide-de-camp [*masc*] – those are the forms used in her memoirs. It was, in the majority of cases, her own choice, only the function of “Secretary of the Minister of Military Affairs” [*masc.*] was named so by Piłsudski. Such a form was meant to express the independence and the autonomy of her position, putting distance between Iłakowiczówna and the military men surrounding her, immunizing her from the attempts to form cliques, and isolating her from the potential intrigue. All of this also required a certain personal predisposition that Piłsudski expressed (and Iłakowiczówna repeated not without approval) in following words: “In the army you are not a woman, you are Kazia.”<sup>22</sup> Iłakowiczówna never tied herself to a man and the issue of romantic relationships with men (or women) never resurfaces in her memoirs. In other people’s memoirs of her one may find vague allusions to a great, never expressed love for a married aristocrat.

The fact of overlapping of different identities that refer automatically to mutually exclusive biological definitions of man or woman should be approached as a grammatical inconvenience that enforces an inevitable choice – “either/or” – on every language user. If you are a man you use masculine inflection, if you are a woman you use the feminine – such is the simple (not to say vulgar) instruction absorbed unconsciously by the language user that is also one of the elements of the male domination in the language.<sup>23</sup>

Iłakowiczówna’s writing exhibits a clear attempt to construct a complex identification which includes different ranges: the male and the female, as well as the childish, in the poetic work. The categories of cultural anthropology would describe it with the term of “cultural valence” used by Antonina Kłoskowska to discuss the situation of people belonging to, or living on, the ethnic fringes of two (or more) cultures. Bivalence (or polivalence) is a sense of belonging fully to two or more cultures at the same time, without the need to choose (ambivalence). One can be thus both a Jew and a Pole, or – today – for instance, a Pole and an American. Viewing Iłakowiczówna’s writing through feminist categories we face a whole range of issues: a fight against gender patterns enclosing women in the restrictive gender ideal, a conscious attempt at emancipation, and finally, acts of subversive overstepping of boundaries and rebellion against the requirements of a patriarchal grammar. Finally, androgyny as described by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own*, is understood as an opportunity to combine the elements of both genders.

Let us take a look at the following sentence that appears grammatically shocking. “Widely renown ophthalmologist [*masc. sg.*], Dr Fugulian, is also a great cook [*fem. sg.*] and hostess.” It comes from the poetic prose of *Z rozbitego fotoplastikonu*,<sup>24</sup> one of Iłakowiczówna’s first attempts at writing a war memoir. Earlier, the character of Fugulian appears just once and in the feminine (“[she] started fire”). The quoted sentence opens the second paragraph, and it is thus clearly exposed and immediately

<sup>22</sup> K. Iłakowiczówna *Ścieżka obok*... 237.

<sup>23</sup> K. Handke „Język a determinanty płci.” *Język a kultura*. Vol. 9, *Płeć w języku i kulturze*. J. Anusiewicz, K. Handke (eds.) Wrocław 1994. 15-30.

<sup>24</sup> K. Iłakowiczówna, XX. *Z rozbitego fotoplastikonu*. Warszawa 1957. 42.

draws attention with its grammatical eccentricity, and with the impossibility of the proposed construct. It de-constructs every essentialist vision. As a doctor, Fugulian is a “renown ophthalmologist [*masc. sg.*]” while remaining “a great cook [*fem. sg.*] and hostess.” Femininity and masculinity exist simultaneously, parallel, repealing the “either/or.” This is only the beginning of the character presentation, further on femininity outweighs masculinity. What follows is a description of extremely complicated procedures performed in an improvised kitchen and their strangeness, resulting from cultural difference, turns them into a kind of transformative ritual that involves not only people, but also water and herbs, and the entire surrounding.

That Iłakowiczówna supported the ideal of androgyny, typical of liberal feminism of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is something completely forgotten today. She is simply believed to have been a Catholic poet, probably as a result of her meditative and prayer poems, the legends of saints that she wrote, and her declarations of faith. She often used masculine grammatical forms but kept the feminine ending of her surname, even though she could have easily abandoned it. There were administrative pressures after the war to abandon traditional endings such as –owa and –ówna (or –ina, –lina) since it was sometimes difficult to reconstruct the basic – in other words, male – form of the name that used the ending. Iłakowiczówna bore her mother’s name: her biological father died in unknown circumstances and she was born out of wedlock. The fact that her father was a son of Tomasz Zan, a philomath and Mickiewicz’s friend, was mythologized only after her death as it had a potential to transform into larger poetic legend. Iłakowiczówna herself built her self-creation around a different fact, namely, that she had two mothers, both very loving. She bore a great sense of guilt towards the foster mother, who looked after her after the death of the biological one, during a turbulent period of adolescence and of gaining independence.

Iłakowiczówna never wrote a straightforward memoir but her entire prose, without exception, relies on memory, uses lived experience, and refers to the past and undoubtedly authorial “Self.” The pre-war *Ścieżka obok drogi* (1938) [The Path Next To The Road], intended as didactic propaganda, did not foreshadow the emergence of a prosaic talent and for several reasons was not well received. It is an odd work which fails to successfully combine the educational and patriotic attempt at presenting a heroic leader with a very individual point of view, resulting in a false mannerism and tone. These reservations do not apply to the post-war books: to the already mentioned cycle *Z rozbitego fotoplastikonu* [From a Broken Kaiser-Panorama] (1957) which could be classified as poetic prose, to *Niewczesne wynurzenia* [Untimely Confessions] (1958), and *Trazymeński zając* [Trasimeno Hare] (1968), nor to the pre-war essays. *Niewczesne wynurzenia* and *Trazymeński zając* refer to childhood, the interwar years and the poet’s travels that revealed to her the relativity of all customs believed to be universal and non-debatable, and to the years 1939-1948, when she stayed in Transylvania, immersed in the Romanian-Hungarian context and supporting herself by teaching languages.

The poet’s memoirs are always arranged in very particular constellations of remembered impressions, shards, and fragments. Despite reservations concerning the

failings of memory [*lit.* “hare memory”], Iłakowiczówna’s descriptions are precise, and events, once related, are not retold, except for an occasional reference serving as a reminder to the reader. Her narrative memoirs are never composed chronologically, each time forming a “bundle” arranged discontinuously. In my attempt to relate the attitude to femininity and masculinity thematized in all of her books, I had to perform a very drastic procedure of arranging the elements according to a pre-conceived interpretative key while in fact in her writing the issue is dispersed among several others. The title of *Z rozbitego fotoplastikonu* is a very accurate formal description. Events spin, the meaning is fluid.

“The world is a special place to which I could never quite get used to. From the earliest days of childhood I have always had a strange sense of a constant provisional, temporality, of non-finality. Things seemed to me and then completely suddenly they would stop being what they seemed.”<sup>25</sup> This declaration opens the lecture I mentioned earlier, presenting the Polish idea for the reconciliation of nations on the international forum. “I believe non-crystallization to be the fundament of poetic personalization” the poet continues “What I need around me is not an emptiness or rigidity but a certain fluidity, a flexible chaos from which I can tear away molecules that I need to shape my worlds.”<sup>26</sup> It is a clearly anti-essentialist declaration. After *Ikarowe Loty* Iłakowiczówna never repeated the early experiment with the hiding of gender but she never stopped blurring it either. What is important is that it is a kind of identity shaped completely outside the field of romantic relationships with men, unrelated to it, and including a broad range of varied roles. She very often draws upon the sphere of the subconscious, tied to childhood.<sup>27</sup> Apart from masculinity and femininity, the poet discovers the stratum of the child and there are several instances in her work supporting Kristeva’s claim that the poetic sphere belongs to the semiotic range of the relationship with the mother. In echolalia, in childish imagination, in the mythological imagination, in the music of the word and the rhythm of the poem, joy (*jouissance*) expresses itself directed elsewhere than the masculine symbolic order. It is a very broad sphere in this particular poet, a sphere that is safe and undoubtedly poetic, though at the same time unable to go outside itself to question the hostile order.

### Identity of the body

Attempts to present the biological determination of feminine otherness are the most pronounced version of female identity expressed in Polish poetry. It is a formulation based on a clearly essentialist premise which, from the very beginning,

<sup>25</sup> K. Iłakowiczówna, „Jak to się dzieje, że nasi nieprzyjaciele naprawdę godni są miłości.” *Wspomnienia...* 28.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, 29.

<sup>27</sup> I emphasize the childhood element in my interpretation of Iłakowiczówna’s work in „Ciemne światło dzieciństwa. O Kazimierze Iłakowiczównie.” *Tygodnik Powszechny* (1999) No. 37.

foreshadows difficulties to describe it with the categories of Western feminism. It is also easily explainable: the most important poetic achievements in this field happened after 1956, in the 60s in the case of Małgorzata Hillar and in the 70s for Anna Świrszczyńska, while Western traditions feminism became the subject of academic and artistic debate in Poland as late as 1989. In other words, after the poets discussed on the following pages already passed away or stopped participating in the artistic life. New stimuli in the feminist discussion found their expression not in poetry but in prose, which is tied to the emergence of the voice of a new generation among whom a unique polarization of attitudes can be observed: many young male writers manifest their traditionalism, or even open misogyny, while several versions of feminism dominate in the prose written by women (Izabela Filipiak, Manuela Gretkowska, Olga Tokarczuk)

The “feminist revolt” in Polish poetry happened much earlier, and Simone de Beauvoir’s famous claim that “one is not born a woman” does not really correspond to it. Womanhood given by birth and giving birth, femininity as a state and an absolute way of being in the world, biological and corporeal, became the most frequently presented dimension of female identity. The very word “feminism,” used in Poland on regular basis before WWII (also by Iłakowiczówna) vanished from the public discourse in the decades of the People’s Republic. The feminist movement was strictly licensed and controlled ideologically during Communism. But it was also the time when genuine social change took place, when the revival of aspirations and equality in access to education, as well as the professional activities of women were, on the one hand, a necessity, and on the other, a universally accepted social fact.

Małgorzata Hillar declared herself a feminist as late as in an *ex post* confession, formulated at the end of her life, after several years of silence and absence from cultural life. In the introduction to her last volume of poetry she reveals the rejection by her mother (that she compensated for with the cult of the Virgin Mary) to have been the psychological background of her literary work. She continues: “I am a woman – and a feminist, fully aware of my womanhood and accepting it as my otherness. I have never tried to resemble men to achieve equality, in fact, I cherish my otherness, remaining acutely aware of the evident discrimination of women. Of social discrimination, as well as economical, political, religious, and all other kinds of discrimination.”<sup>28</sup> She nonetheless believed her feminist work to be marginal: “I think I have written only two feminist poems.” She refers to two texts from *Czekanie na Dawida* [Waiting for David] (1967), a volume containing a 16-poem cycle devoted to motherhood. Hillar considers “Kropla deszczu” [A Drop of Rain] and “Życie jest jedno” [There is One Life] to be her feminist poems and – which seems to follow from her commentary – does not identify writing about womanhood and expressing the female experience with feminism.

In both poems there reappears a similar idea: that of male creativity as something destructive, responsible for starting wars, contrasted with the biological creativity of

<sup>28</sup> M. Hillar *Dwadzieścia lat minęło odkąd umarłam*, w: *Gotowość do Zmartwychwstania*, Warszawa 1995, s. 9-10.

women, one that brings life and peace. The male need for dominance is viewed as a hidden subtext of all invention and social discovery and two extremes: creative – though in fact destructive – masculinity and femininity entailing the pain of birth and sacrifice are divided by an abyss. This abyss could be crossed perhaps at some point in the future, by a matriarchal society. In *Czekanie na Dawida* (1967) Hillar considers the possibility of a women-built civilization. “When she/ takes over/ the world/ peace will follow” and as it is the last poem of the volume, the statement is strongly emphasized. A toned down version of the poem, from 1995, introduces a conditional “If she/ took over / the world, / peace would follow.”<sup>29</sup> The possibility of a “matriarchate” is, thus, believed to be an impossible hypothesis.

It is difficult to confront those texts with philosophical questions. Hillar’s poems are a confession intertwined with assessment of the present and condemnation of war. They use stereotypes and today often seem to be a slightly subdued and “femininely” transformed variety of the ideological vision back from the day of People’s Republic. Womanhood is an impassable condition here and appears to be marked by an unsolvable drama: the need for male love and at the same time the impossibility to build an understanding more permanent than the temporary relief found in the act of love. Also, the child reveals itself as the Other in the poems on motherhood, desired but objectified and impossible to be expressed as a subject, a “pink human suckling pig” from “Karmiąca.” [Nursing].

However, the ease with which Hillar’s vision could be overthrown is deceptive. The construction of the subject in her poems proves, in fact, the validity of the feminist critique of patriarchy – the mystified, metaphysical construction of the female subject confronted with the male “Self” tightens the female space so that it becomes a prison. She is rejected by the Symbolic order, there is, in fact, no place for her at all, not even enough for her to speak. Banished from culture and harmed by nature all she can do is fall silent.

Through a vision of physical, biological womanhood Anna Świrszczyńska successfully presents both the social drama of the woman and her own vision of liberation through overcoming the dualism of body and soul. She matured long for this, in 1970, in a note included in *Poezje Wybrane* [Selected Poems] she still believed the prose poem to be her artistic speciality. Referring to this period of her work, which began in the 30s, Czesław Miłosz used the notions of “intertextuality” and “calligraphy.” Future feminism is only foreshadowed by the multitude of female cultural heroes in her work, such as Helen, Madame Bovary or Valkyrie.<sup>30</sup> The woman is seen as placed inside male culture, her presence is emphasized but without breaking the dominating code. She does not appear as a recognizable voice but as a character. In one of the poems describing a great concert at the court of a ruler of the past, next to the king there “squirms his lush favorite, glittering

<sup>29</sup> M. Hillar, *Czekanie na Dawida*. Warszawa 1967. 67; M. Hillar *Gotowość do...*, p. 83. I am indebted for this observation to Agnieszka Nietrešta’s research published in: *Małgorzata Hillar. Księżniczka wyobraźni*. Kraków 2003.

<sup>30</sup> Cz. Miłosz *Jakiegoż to gościa mieliśmy. O Annie Świrszczyńskiej*, Kraków 1996.

with the pomp of endearing charm. Her chest heaves rapidly. She smiles a wicked and then a painful smile. His Majesty looks the other way.”<sup>31</sup> The question of identity of the speaking subject is not strongly pronounced here, and it would not require much effort to prove that it could be contained by the formula of androgyny. For example, in the prose poem “Sztuka” [Art], referred to by Miłosz as well, there is a talk of the desire to jest, interwoven with the tendency to be serious. The speaker describes the latter as a “deadly seriousness of the dying man who refers to candles as candles and to the wife as the wife.” The equation of manhood and masculinity is treated as something obvious but there is also a hidden assumption that I (the speaking poet) is him. But Świrszczyńska early work also contains elements of social provocation. In the cycle of portraits, *Sześć kobiet*, [Six women] “Amelia czyli Kobieta z charakterem” [Amelia, or Woman of Character] makes an appearance:

Amelia likes kissing men she does not love. So she kisses strange men.  
She says:  
This, precisely, is nice, as it is indecent.  
To be indecent is to confirm one’s freedom.  
In matters of love Amelia is an intellectual.<sup>32</sup>

“Kissing” should probably be read here as a socially acceptable expression for having sex – as in the poetry of Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska or Halina Poświatowska.

The new formula of corporeal identity emerged gradually in Świrszczyńska’s writing, first in *Czarne słowa* [Black Words], in poems described as “African stylizations,” and matured as late as the 70s, when the author herself was about 60. *Jestem baba* (1972) [I Am Baba] can be considered a breakthrough, tied to a fundamental shift in style, to a rejection of culturalism, to factography, and laconic expression. The title of the volume is a bold and irreverent assertion of identity. “Baba” is disrespectful in Polish; it is a folk expression referring to an old woman. In folk tales “baba” and “dziad” [the male equivalent of baba] are always coupled, and “dziad” also means someone poor, sometimes even a “beggar” (interestingly, the word for the female beggar is “dziadówka.” [dziad with a *fem. dim.* ending]) The semantic field of “baba” is broad and includes the negativity of “ty babo” [direct address that borders on name calling]; or, more intensely: “babsztylu,” “babiszonie” [more pejorative forms of “baba” – “womanoid”]; but also the neutral, even warm, “babciu” [granny] in the mouth of a child; to the approving, self-descriptive “hej babki! [hey ladies!] let’s get down to work, we’ll show them!”

As she was going through this fundamental change, in 1973, Świrszczyńska talked about her poetic work in the introduction to *Poezje wybrane*: “Style is the poet’s enemy and it is most advantageous when it is non-existent. Let me explain it with a paradoxical shortcut: writers have two goals. The first one is to create their own style. The second – to destroy their own style. The latter is more difficult and

<sup>31</sup> A. Świrszczyńska *Liryki zebrane*, Warszawa 1958. 44.

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem, 136.



takes more time.”<sup>33</sup> Only after she moved beyond the layer of cultural stylization was Świrszczyńska able to openly put the question of womanhood in the center of attention; earlier it was a presence rather subdued, entangled in aestheticizations. Świrszczyńska's new style is not her own invention only, anti-aestheticism manifested in the poetry of Różewicz seems to have been a convenient point of departure here, except in Różewicz the method of constataion, simplicity, and the rejection of metaphor serve a different purpose – to formulate an accusation against the Western civilization after the shock of mass annihilation. In Świrszczyńska, a connection between the war experience and a change in style is also present – in the poems about the Warsaw Uprising from *Budowałam barykadę* [I Built a Barricade] (1974). The shock of war, stylistic change, and the possibility of creating a new subject all found a common denominator in the need for destruction to maintain relevance.

*Jestem baba* is a manifesto not of female poetry but of “baba” poetry, with its triumph of womanhood devoid of belying mysticism. Świrszczyńska positions her own corporeal sensations in relation to the experience of women disrespected the most: old peasant women, city beggars, wives of alcoholics, those giving birth in pain and those who die forgotten by everyone. The “Self” must be placed within a gaping amplitude of one’s own physical sensations that extends between temporary but boundless happiness and acute pain and utter despair, which in a romantic relationship with a man can also become the sign of intensity of life. Other women are included in the sense of empathy, the female “Self” understands them and describes them without much difficulty. Female identity is contrasted with the male only on one plane – that of social life, always seen from the outside and viewed as “baba’s” sub-condition. Men and women are equal in the Uprising episodes described in *Budowałam barykadę*, in the extreme and life-threatening situation. Their reactions are described as a capacity for sacrifice always contrasted with cowardice, while idealism is paradoxically coupled with practicality in both sexes. Similar equality appears also in the face of death. The difference reveals itself in the “normal world,” exposed by love and all that which is social; however, this does not directly concern the situation of the female speaker, the female persona of the poem. What we seem to be facing here is one of the paradoxes of the poetical vision of the world, a tendency to exclude the speaking “Self” from gender obligations and stereotypes. Seeing “from the inside” always changes the perspective.

The female “I” is, in a way, fuller, truer, closer to the existential truth because of the pain and experience of motherhood from which the body cannot be excluded. This, however, is not contrasted with the male experience of subjectivity. In love, the female “I” is so strong that it even views pain as an expression of the heat of emotion. A love relationship with a man resembles a duel “Our two hatreds / bite each other / with their beautiful white teeth” the poet says in an epigrammatic verse from *Szczęście jak psi ogon* [Happy As Dog’s Tail].<sup>34</sup> Only a friendship with the man,

<sup>33</sup> A. Świrszczyńska, *Poezje wybrane*, Warszawa 1973.15. Quoted in Miłosz’s book and by Małgorzata Baranowska in „Szyborska, Świrszczyńska – dwa bieguny codzienności.” *Sporne postaci polskiej literatury współczesnej*. Warszawa, 1996. 17..

<sup>34</sup> A. Świrszczyńska „Gryzą się” [Biting] *Szczęśliwa jako psi ogon*. Kraków, 1978. 67.



most strongly pronounced in Świrszczyńska's last, posthumous volume, exhibits a possibility of a complete understanding.

The corporeal formula of womanhood in Świrszczyńska is a radical challenge to the centuries of tradition holding everything that is of the flesh as lower, and as a result something that must be denied, rejected, and contrasted with elevating spirituality. That Świrszczyńska re-evaluates the body is her great merit. It would be futile to attempt a deconstructive critique here and claim that the poet relies in fact on the linguistic construct of the body and not its identity, which the body does not have outside the cultural matrix; or that she practices a kind of "na ve realism" and utilizes metaphysical calques telling us to believe in the essence anchored outside the text. Świrszczyńska changes the matrix: she begins to build her vision of the human being beginning with herself as a woman and with her own body in order to create a certain kind of corporeal spirituality, not fully free from the dualism of body and soul but always assuming an irreducible physicality. In "Zostanę babką klozetowa" [I Will Be A Toilet Cleaning Lady] she talks about the soul as the good old "sister of the bladder and the bowel." The female protagonists of her poems are familiar and empathic figures: toilet cleaner, beggar, wife of a drunk, peasant, and an old mother forgotten by her children. There is no sense of strangeness or distance between their world and the emotions of the speaker that could result, for instance, from the difference in the educational background or the condition of the artist, someone socially aware, independent, and in control of her life. On the contrary, there is a possibility of identification.

Sometimes a playful fight between body and soul takes place (for instance in "Dusza i ciało na plaży," [Body and Soul On The Beach]), but the body has stronger arguments at its disposal. Existence itself is corporeal. But here also the drama of existence opens, resulting from its impermanence. "When I run, / I laugh with my feet // When I run, / I swallow the world with my feet // When I run, / I have ten feet // All my feet / shout. // I exist only / when I run."<sup>35</sup> "I Have Ten Feet" resembles, in a way, Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*. The poem's motivations are different, though, as it shows the ecstatic sensation of movement from the inside. Instead of "I think, therefore I am," we are told "I run, so I exist." Almost ascetic, with their very simple language Świrszczyńska's poems are entangled in various polemic references to a stagnant tradition. Their heroine develops a female version of the "will to power," but she never once mentions Nietzsche because intertextuality, or debate, is not her point.

## Two patterns, several models

Androgyny is a highly complex type of identity that does not result in a single model, and which contains varied cultural masculine and feminine ranges. Its shape is always an individually constructed mosaic. Its presence is usually discreet: the

<sup>35</sup> A. Świrszczyńska „Mam dziesięć nóg” [I Have Ten Feet] *Szczęśliwa jako psi ogon*. Kraków, 1978. 13.

speaking subject often simply avoids using grammatical forms that disclose gender, and the text can be read as both masculine and feminine. This way, the speaker of the poem neutralizes the compulsion to define each situation with regards to gender present in normal social life. This is also why androgyny is difficult to spot, as the appearance of a “neutral” utterance does not exclude incidental returns to femininity, or its strong accentuation in selected spheres and weak presence in others. Iłakowiczówna’s work is an opportunity to trace the motifs and the methods of constructing such a complex identity, quite common at the beginning of the century. Female androgyny is a typical formula of modernist individualism.<sup>36</sup>

I believe it to be something more than just an adventure of gender in the period of Young Poland which was hostile towards women. It is a starting point for the development of one of the most common models of the “Self,” tied to the aspiration of female emancipation. The androgynous “I” establishes itself directly in the world, and does not view the romantic relationship with a man to be the only, the most important, and generally privileged model on which one’s self-creation is to be founded. Naturally, in several instances one could point out the poets’ dispersion in the dominant model; however, it needs to be stressed that androgyny does not entail a lack of female identification, but rather its co-existence with models identified culturally as “more masculine” and, at the same time, an awareness of non-finality of all description and the fluidity lurking beneath it. At the beginning of the century, such identification was an act of independence and courage, even though today the clarity of this option is blurred and unintelligible. It has found its continuation, however, and is the main voice in poetry written by women. Most poetic texts by Szyborska are undetermined. What draws attention is their rationalism and the ability to transform situations into intellectual generalizations. Their irony reveals a strong polemic intention towards the male stereotypes rather than a gentle one. Androgyny and anti-essentialism also characterize the construction of the subject in the poetry of Julia Hartwig, where the love relationship is a marginal experience in the process of constructing subjectivity.

Visions of womanhood as a strong, basic and irreducible part of identity (and not as a feature of inferiority, but on the contrary, an element of positive characterization) require a revolution of values. To base the positive vision of womanhood on the biologically defined sex, Świrszczyńska had to arrange the relation of nature and culture differently than it has been done before, assuming the former to be a fundamental dimension to which absolute truth is related. It was not a revolution of language in Polish poetry and so there are few instances that could be viewed as an implementation of the idea of *écriture féminine*. It is also difficult to view the biologically defined female identity as containable by mainstream feminism which energetically cuts itself off from the biological definitions as a gateway to the worst sort of determinism. Świrszczyńska’s poetry is close to Różewicz’s tradition. Identity

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<sup>36</sup> Compare: G. Ritz „Młoda Polska a transgresja płciowa.” *Nić w labiryncie pożądania*. Warszawa, 2002. 111-136.

is a factor from the outside of the text and its textual representation does not require the construction of a different, feminine language: it assumes a new order of values. One could note, however, that what we are given on the level of text is not identity but a conviction of its existence outside the text, and as a result, a myth of identity. This is why Świrszczyńska wants to “destroy style”; at some point she gives up calligraphy she was close to debuting. After the “female revolution of values” she has to strengthen the referential dimension of the text so that she can reach through the word-transmitter to what really matters.

Those two patterns of identity do not exhaust the issue of poetic creations concerning womanhood; they only point to one of the lines of tension. The difficulty in capturing phenomena has several causes. The feminist revolution took place in Polish poetry without the feminist debate, today’s categories do not fully correspond to the historical situation. Sometimes one cannot even describe the internal convictions contained in the text with the categories proposed by Western feminism which continues to emphasize the constraint (and oppressiveness) of heterosexuality, whereas Polish poets willingly mythologize the heterosexual act of sex seeing in the process the value of rebellion, of crossing the cultural norm that in fact imposes silence.

*Translation: Anna Warso*

## Marek ZALESKI

### Białoszewski: Idyllic

It has been half a century since the publication of Miron Białoszewski's debut making collection. Białoszewski turned out to be a revelator of poetic language of the scale that today is still difficult to assess, but the *novum* of his poems in 1956 relied also on their bringing forth a record of a peripheral existence, a very particular kind of record – although that too was obviously influenced by the venerable poetic tradition. His poetic work can be placed within the tradition of “the idyll of the Self,” especially in one of its models that Renato Poggioli names the “the idyll of one's own room” (67).<sup>1</sup> One's own room is to be understood not as much a bastion of privacy (which around that time was completely unprotected), but rather as a shelter or a recess providing the peace necessary for contemplation and relief. It is the *locus amoenus* of the Stalinist age. Rituals and object filling this private space, such as the stove “like a triumphal arch” (in “Oh! Oh! Should They Take Away My Stove...”),<sup>2</sup> or the wardrobe („Sztuki piękne mojego pokoju”) transform

<sup>1</sup> R. Poggioli *Wierzbowa fujarka* [The Oaten Flute] transl. F. Jarzyna, „Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich,” Vol. 3.1, p. 67. Białoszewski's volume is rich in traditional pastoral imagery, such as the suburban garden of Eden in „Ballada z makaty” in all its seasons; a beer selling booth in Wołomin that summons the shepherds like the manger in Bethlehem („Filozofia Wołomina”); there are Chekhovian oxen and angels in “Słowa dokładane do wiśniowych wołów” and the smell of hallway in a Warsaw tenement building evokes the image of a hop plantation on the day of brewing. („Zadumanie o sieni kamienicznej”)

<sup>2</sup> Quotations from Białoszewski based on translations by Andrzej Busza and Bogdan Czaykowski [BCZ]. Where translations were unavailable, I leave original poem titles and provide a working translation of the quoted passage (AW)

the hermitage into a private *Sans souci* in which one dances the quadrille and precious time passes, as the ending of the latter poem informs. Solitude is an essential state to the contemplating mind, as essential as air and the mythology of a poet which in this case is nothing other than a private idyll of belonging, belonging to a confraternity – and not just any confraternity: the speaker of Białoszewski's poem is aware that he joins a long lineage of predecessors: "Yet/ my hermitage/ has its temptations:/ solitude / memories of the world / and that I consider myself a poet." ("Of My Hermitage With Calling" [BCZ]).

One's own room is also an extension of the Self which for Białoszewski is the most basic instance of being-in-the-world – omnipresent to the extent characteristic of Romantic poets who perceived the boundaries of the Self to be the only boundaries of the world. It is interesting indeed that an arch-anti-Romantic such as Białoszewski shares with the Romantics the belief in the supremacy of the Self, a paradox that could perhaps be explained if one views his poetry as a demonstration of power of the projecting, creative Self of the poet – in other words, if one views Białoszewski poetic work as a realization of the "defensive and aggressive variety" of subjectivity (148).<sup>3</sup> Hyperactivity of the lyrical voice is an attempt to reconcile the contradiction resulting from existence within two separate and conflicting orders: subjectivity and the world. Białoszewski achieves this in the simplest possible way – by negation. He strives to be like a child: unified with the world. And the worm of consciousness? The poet pretends not to feel its bite. Being in all possible forms is good by its very nature and such is our existence in it as well. "I am happy that I think" (from "A Joyful Self-Portrait" [BCZ]) means: I am happy, therefore I am: "consciousness is a dance of joy" the poem continues. Being is joy, but being no more is "joy unspeakable."

Readings of Białoszewski's early poems offered by prominent critics such as Jacek Łukasiewicz and Artur Sandauer determined important interpretative directions inasmuch as they mystified the body of his work. The poet's alienation, his decision to take the position of an outsider – his "scavengery," emphasized by Łukasiewicz,<sup>4</sup> and the allegedly ostentatious, almost nihilistic strategy of a "va-grant" posited by Sandauer,<sup>5</sup> were in fact – or so one might infer today – strategies

<sup>3</sup> Discussed by Agata Bielik-Robson in *Duch powierzchni. Rewizja romantyczna i filozofia*, Universitas, Kraków (2004) 148 and elsewhere.

<sup>4</sup> „Acknowledging the importance of the heroic attitude, one would be more inclined to acknowledge an even greater importance of a different one, one suspicious towards itself, one that looks for ready-mades among the rubbish and attempts to investigate their usefulness, one that is likely to be described as 'scavengery' (...) This 'scavenging' attitude is very important in poets.” J. Łukasiewicz, *Szmaciarze i bohaterowie*. [Rag-men and Heroes] Więź, Warszawa (1963) 109.

<sup>5</sup> Sandauer saw in Białoszewski a „combination of an artist and a tramp.” The critic relied perhaps too heavily on Sartre's reading of Genet in *Jean Genet– comedien et martyr*, also recalled in his essay („Poezja rupieci” [Poetry of oddment] *Kultura*, 1966 Vol. 29-30). „Of course Białoszewski is not a criminal but he has a similar attitude.” After: Sandauer, *Samobójstwo Mitrydatesa*. Czytelnik (Warszawa) 1968. 121 and 127.

of a dandy who turns necessity into virtue, a choice definitely more aesthetic than political. Sandauer's categorization in particular appears to be a misunderstanding. The nonchalance of the critic paired with his patronal goodwill (the latter cannot be denied) equipped him with too great an inclination to utter half-truths about Białoszewski's poetry.

It was neither poetry of a "tramp" nor "a poetry of oddment." Białoszewski was a dandy and he longed for things of beauty, even though he had to settle for "oddments," and those who remember him, recall him as someone far from a "tramp." The fascination with ugliness and rubbish, attributed (and suggested) to him by Sandauer were not his own. Sandauer writes: "Białoszewski is fascinated with broken and derelict objects, neglected and covered with dust. What seems yet another apotheosis of 'commonality,' the 'floor' [in his poem] is nothing else than the 'the lying side of our daily Lord, our ordinary days.' After a closer look, one discovers that the more disused the object, the more will Białoszewski be fascinated with it." Both Białoszewski and Czachorowski practiced the cult of beauty:

Miron's poetic youth seems almost compensational with regard to the severe poverty of existence – rich and baroque, laden with jewels of metaphors, expansive, multi-worded. This is how his friend, Swen–Czachorowski, wrote as well; it was a poetic cultivated in the circles of young poets of Kobyłka. He did not immediately obey Ludwik's [Hering] absolute and adamant postulate: brevity, austerity, not to say – ordinariness. (257)<sup>6</sup>

But it was also not "everyday beauty," which in the work of other poets – for instance, in Leopold Staff's *Wilkina* – invites rather sentimental sacralizations of the ordinary. The fascination with what is accessible to touch and sight, generally common, everyday, and rudimentary, apparent in *The Revolution of Things*, is of a rather different origin. It results from the experience of uncanniness of the ordinary. Such a category immediately leads us in the direction of the Freudian *Unheimliche*, except in this case we seem to be facing its – so to say – positive variety. Białoszewski appears to be a phenomenologist of what Freudian discourse would refer to as *Unheimliche der Gewöhnlichkeit*, but the convenient Freudian trope is false in this particular instance. A more suitable interpretation of *Unheimliche* as strangeness is suggested by Stanley Cavell in his investigation of the "ordinary"; it is the result of skepticism that has that found its newer incarnation in the philosophy of language from Wittgenstein's writings. Modern skepticism equips language as a tool of everyday communication with the ability, or even desire, to undermine and challenge itself and by doing this it raises awareness of the surreal character of the real, in other words, of non-obviousness of what is real. From this perspective, the world itself becomes problematic – "a scandal to phi-

<sup>6</sup> H. Kirchner „Tworzenie Mirona. Nowe źródła biograficzne" In: *Pisanie Białoszewskiego*. M. Głowiński, Z. Łapiński (eds) Wydawnictwo IBL PAN (Warszawa) 1993. 257.

losophy” as Kant would have said.<sup>7</sup> What evokes anxious attention or fascination bordering on awe is the epiphanic scene of appearance, the aura of event in itself. Beginning with Hofmannsthal, the appearance of an ordinary thing in its proper form, natural and almost necessary and yet suddenly non-obvious and resisting our knowledge of it (both visual knowledge and one previously acquired that allow for its immanentization or assimilation) represents the modern epiphany.<sup>8</sup> This is precisely how an epiphany happens also in *The Revolution of Things* [Obroty rzeczy] where the appearance of things is always helped by the presence of the subject.<sup>9</sup> The subject reveals itself as a necessary catalyst, an interaction and a co-presence, as the “Self” is more than the locus of manifestation of *principium individuationis*. It is also its cosmic extension: “We are starfish. / Not separate from anything. / Dispersed.” („My rozgwiadzy” [We, starfish]). In “Noce nieoddzielenia” [The Nights of Un-separateness] the subject is a co-existence. “It is from my breast / that stairs of reality grow...Strike me / O structure of my world!” („My Jacobs of Exhaustion” [BCZ]) Białoszewski facilitates the appearance of things because the phenomenon never ceases to please and amaze him: “I gape astonished / and I astonish myself / and comment on the lives of things around me.” (“Of My Hermitage With Calling” [BCZ])

An older division of labor, as Aleksander Wat observes, assumed surprise and marvel to be the domain of philosophers while the task admiration was given to poets.<sup>10</sup> This division was abandoned in Romanticism – in *Balon*, sentimental poet Kajetan Koźmian writes: “Our task is to gaze, marvel and praise.” His sense of marvel still concerns, conventionally, the “high” object of rhetorical *decorum* (in

<sup>7</sup> S. Cavell “The Uncanniness of the Ordinary” in: Cavell, *In quest of the Ordinary: Lines in Scepticism and Romanticism*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1988. 154: “My idea is that what in philosophy is known as skepticism (for example, as in Descartes, Hume and Kant) is a relation to the world, and to others, and to myself, and to language, that is known to what you might call literature, or anyway responded to in literature, in uncounted other guises – in Shakespeare’s tragic heroes, in Emerson’s and Thoreau’s “silent melancholy” and “quiet desperation,” in Wordsworth’s perception of us as without “interest,” in Poe’s “perverseness.” Why philosophy and literature to not know this about one another – and to that extent remain unknown to themselves – has been my theme ut seems to me forever.”

<sup>8</sup> Ryszard Nycz discusses modern epiphany in *Literatura jako trop rzeczywistości*. Universitas, Kraków (2001) 41 and elsewhere.

<sup>9</sup> A. Bielik Robson discusses epiphany as „providing affirmative power in the disenchanted world” and the related, inextricable „will to participate” of the subject as well as the power of the gaze complementing the sphere of ontology in the “Introduction” to Ch. Taylor *Źródła podmiotowości. Narodziny tożsamości nowoczesnej* [Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity] transl. M. Gruszczyński et. al., T. Gadacz (ed.) with an Introduction by A. Bielik-Robson. PWN, Warszawa (2001) p. L and n. Bielik-Robson develops the idea in *Duch powierzchni*. 126, 343 and elsewhere.

<sup>10</sup> „Dziewięć uwag do portretu Józefa Stalina” In: A. Wat. *Świat na haku i pod kluczem*. K. Rutkowski (ed.) Polonia Book Fund, London 1985. 135-136.

this particular case, “fairer sex”). One of the Romantics compared poetic admiration to a child’s sense of wonder.<sup>11</sup> But the Romantic poet became a philosopher. Admittedly, a philosopher in the service of a beloved absolute, the absolute of Beauty that demanded admiration, but admiration accompanied by a fearful wonder or awe. Romantic beauty began to relish the sublime, where awe is an important a category in the investigation of the nature of esthetic experience. In the gaze of Mickiewicz’s subject in *Sonnets of the Crimea*, wonder at the world of natural objects and phenomena is accompanied both by admiration and awe. The post-Romantic poets gladly position themselves in this aesthetic, although, tired with the growing degree of intellectualization of the discourse on the subject, they are ready to side with the “naïve” gaze. Beauty, according to Josif Brodski, strips away sense from reality. Faced with an object or phenomenon that evoke admiration, one does not ask what they mean, it is enough that they *are*. Białoszewski strives to be a child of admiration understood in such naïve terms.

The instance of the *appearance* of things does not awe the speaking subject, it does not frighten nor confuse him, or bring forth resistance or manifestations of cognitive helplessness in the face of strange order. In the scene of their *appearance*, things are illuminated by an aura of positive sublimity and this appearance of things needs to find appropriate representation in the language of the poet, a representation worthy of ordinariness taking the form of mystery play:

How glad I am  
that you are a sky and a kaleidoscope  
that you have so many artificial stars.  
and that you shine so in a monstrance of brightness when I raise  
your hollowed half globe round the eyes  
against the air.  
How unrestrained you are  
in your richness  
my colander. (“Grey Eminences of Rapture” [BCZ])

The stove in the poem “is also beautiful” in the evening when it “enters the elements/ of monumental shrouding.” In “Podłogo, błogosław!” [Bless, O Floor!] the presence of the floor, its color and texture, “greybrownness of turnip” makes an appearance in several scenes, perseverations, and alternations. Białoszewski writes his own *Metamorphoses*. Each increasingly devout presentation of the object in the poem is a trace of what its essence appears to be. Throughout this chase, changes its ontological status: the thing becomes a “concerting word” – as in Czachorowski’s poems, the order of language, in other words, the order of late allegory, is revealed as the proper order of the existence of things. Finally, the attempt to express [in words] turns into an incantation, in a prayerful chant.

This presentation is has been making appearance forms in poetry in increasingly diversified since Romanticism: next to poetry that entered the circle of tormented

<sup>11</sup> S. Coleridge, *Biografia Litteraria*, Vol. 1, London 1817. 85.



delectation with the sublime and awesome, there is also poetry that is celebratory, epiphanically hymnal (*vide* Novalis) but also ironic, a record of negative sublimity (*vide* Baudelaire), inspired by the “surprise of things” – precisely by the simplest ones. It was Wordsworth who spoke of “dignities of plain occurrence” (5).<sup>12</sup> And dignities of plain occurrences are only a step away from the dignity of trivial and insignificant. Mickiewicz gives an intriguing reply to his friends’ insistence that he visited the alleged grave of Homer in Smyrna.

I was entirely uninterested in that!...There was [at the entrance to Homer’s Tomb] a pile of manure and rubbish, all remains thrown in together: filth, rubbish, swill, bones, broken skulls, a piece of old shoe sole, some feathers – that I liked the most. It stood there for a long time, as it all looked to me like front of an inn in Poland. (561)<sup>13</sup>

More than with anything else, Mickiewicz is preoccupied with the scene of ordinary things (in this particular case, a pile of rubbish) making an appearance in an extraordinary way. In Norwid, ordinary things, insignificant and seemingly trivial details will soon become a medium of most strange correspondence and epiphanic “drama of small things.”<sup>14</sup>

The world is a “storehouse of contemplation” to the author the author of *The Revolution of Things*, a place of “the carnival of poetry/ for a solemn unceasing amazement” (“Of My Hermitage...”). What should be noted (and what suggests the “idyll of one’s own room”) is the fact that the strangeness of everyday objects, differently than in Freud or – too look into more literary and familiar sources – in Tuwim or Gombrowicz, is not sinister or demonic in its character. It does not result in tormenting repetitions, it does not deprive of sense and turn our definition of reality inside out. Strangeness in Białoszewski is not a hole in the Great Other, in the symbolic system that we use to tame the world. On the contrary, it makes reality more attractive and strengthens it. Because of its “strangeness,” reality turns out to be friendly and deserving of adoration, it evokes admiration instead of dread, moreover – as critics have noted – Białoszewski’s everyday is sacralized.<sup>15</sup> It is the gesture of sacralization and the accompanying ritualization of mundane activities directs us most successfully at the notion of everyday lived as positively experienced *Unheimliche*. Ordinary objects and actions do not evoke

<sup>12</sup> „Dignities of plain occurrence”. After: P.V. Marinelli *Pastoral. The Critical idiom*. Methuen, London (1971) 5.

<sup>13</sup> After: D. Siwicka. *Turcja* In: J.M. Rymkiewicz, D. Siwicka, A. Witkowska, M. Zielińska *Mickiewicz. Encyklopedia*. Świat Książki, Warszawa (2001) 561.

<sup>14</sup> „A small thing! Is it a small thing? ... to see in the movement of heel/ in the cork sole of the shoe – to see the soul at work – it is drama!” Norwid, *Aktor* [Actor] (second version). Act I, Sc. I. 8-14. R. Nycz describes those trivial events and details that in Norwid’s *Black Flowers* and *White Flowers* become the center point of „simple allegories” as an novel “project of an epiphanic discourse” in *Literatura jako trop rzeczywistości*. 90 and elsewhere.

<sup>15</sup> J. Kwiatkowski „Liturgia i abulia” in: J. Kwiatkowski, *Klucze do wyobraźni*. PIW, Warszawa (1964).

awed amazement, which does not mean that they do not appear sublime: when they become the object of attention, they evade description. Their contemplation leads to the scene of recognition. *Anagnorisis*, or recognition, revelation, discovery, is an old trope that found its way from tragedy to pastoral elegy. In modern elegy it always has the character of epiphany.<sup>16</sup> One should emphasize that the elegiac *anagnorisis* is always a recognition by someone – subjective perspective is always present in the scene of recognition, and the elegy reveals itself as the starting form of the subjectivization of poetry, the prototype of the monodist utterance and, as such, of the lyric. The Romantics chose elegy as their favorite genre and located monody in reflection – exponent of the presence of the speaking subject. Coleridge believed elegy to be “form of poetry natural to the reflective mind. It may treat of any subject, but it must treat of no subject for itself, but always and exclusively with reference to the poet himself” (15).<sup>17</sup> As expected of a late modern or postmodern poet, Białoszewski is “pre-romantically” lyrical – he often gives up on the monologic utterance – but never on the subject, and his manner of representation of things is drastically subjectified. The elegiac perspective turns out to be also his perspective, even if it is not directly evoked. Things *are* – and this is wonderful! – but they always break, become lost, fall apart or are destroyed. This is evident to Białoszewski who took years to write *A Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising*. But they exist not only in the perspective of loss. They are lost in other ways, too.

In the scene of recognition, the alleged nature of things always reveals itself to be something yet different. Does it exist at all then? If it does, it can never be finally captured, and thus it exists in an almost divine way known from apophatic theology. Things appear to us always in their “revolution” [PL: *obrót*, *pl. obroty*] therefore in motion, in a volatile form. A trace of this instability is found in the language: in Polish, things can “take a turn” [PL: *przybierają obrót*] and to “brać kogoś w obroty” implies engaging or forcing someone into an intense activity. The *Polish Language Dictionary* cites a sentence by Henryk Rzewuski as one of the usages of “*obrót (pl. obroty)*” [revolution, spin, turn] – “Zwyczajnie juryści, nie umieją ręką, więc językiem biorą nas w obroty.” [Since they cannot do it by hand, jurists use their language]. Qualified as archaic by Witold Doroszewski, the expression “*być (znaleźć się) w obrotach*” means “to find oneself in trouble.” Revolution [*obrót*] is also present in expressions such as “*zmiana kierunku, przebieg, tok (sprawy, rozmowy)*” [turn of direction, turn of events, conversation turn]. “*Obrotny [adj.]* means “agile, nimble.” Things, therefore, *appear* in their accidental forms of existence. But the majesty of those forms is not in any way lesser than the majesty of ultimate things:

<sup>16</sup> Compare: A.F. Potts *The Elegiac Mode: Poetic Form in Wordsworth and Other Elegist*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1967. 36 and elsewhere; K.E. Smythe *Figuring Grief. Gallant, Munro and the Poetics of Elegy*, McGill-Queens University Press, Quebec (1992). 11 and elsewhere.

<sup>17</sup> After: C.M. Schenck *Mourning and Panegyric. The Poetics of Pastoral Ceremony*. The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park and London (1988) 15.

Wall, I am not worthy  
that you should fill me with constant wonder,  
and you too, fork...  
and you, dusts... ("Of My Hermitage...")

Writing becomes an act of adoration, joy; in Białoszewski's poems the speaker "dances" – as the poets of old did, recalled by Aleksander Wat. And his poetry becomes a figure of mystery play, of laudatory ritual, of apotheosis. The voice of *The Revolution of Things* belongs to an ecstatic who dances before the majesty of ordinary things. This tone will not change much in his latter volumes, though it is never as clear as here.<sup>18</sup>

"A rag-man' cannot afford optimism in the attitude to his art and towards himself" Łukasiewicz writes in his essay. But, as have already seen, this observation is not applicable to Białoszewski! Unlike Różewicz, Czycz, Bursa, and the "turpists" of the '56 generation, Białoszewski has a positive poetic mythology and even though it cannot be placed within the tradition of "the idyll of lyrical inspiration,"<sup>19</sup> it creates the idyll of writing as participation in the *happening* of the world. The latter, in turn, in someone "considering himself a poet" seems to be a consequence of the idyll of being itself.

First I went into the street  
down the stairs,  
would you believe it,  
down stairs.  
Then acquaintances of strangers  
and I passed one another by.  
What a pity  
you did not see  
how people walk  
what a pity. ("A Ballad Of Going Down To The Store" [BCZ])

One could say that, as a record of described experiences, the text itself becomes the pastoral *otium*. It is thus not surprising that Białoszewski does not shy away from the role of the poet. On the contrary, he subscribes to it. Balcerzan notes that Białoszewski's poetic strategy is in fact a strategy of "arch-poet": "at the core of it there lies a tolerance 'for everything that exists.'" <sup>20</sup> Naturally! The sense of being at

<sup>18</sup> "Art" Balcerzan writes: „is a 'joy of multiplication of everything by everything' – as we read in "Próba dopasowania się" from *Rachunek zachciankowy* – a joy both childlike and refined. E. Balcerzan, *Poezja polska w latach 1939-1966*, Vol. 1: *Strategie liryczne*. WSiP, Warszawa (1982) 239.

<sup>19</sup> Balcerzan classifies Miłosz's „Do Tadeusza Różewicza poety" as an „idyll of lyrical inspiration," in other words, an expression of optimistic mythology of poetic art, and contrasts it with Różewicz's poems from that period, bearing witness to the "agonizing shame of writing." One should add, however, that Balcerzan points to "Song on Porcelain" admitting that Miłosz, too, calls this positive mythology into question. (op. cit. 230, 229)

<sup>20</sup> Op.cit. 237. Balcerzan continues: „In Białoszewski everything is worthy of respect because literally everything is the locus of constant metamorphoses that fascinate and

home in the world equips Białoszewski's subject with something more than a sense of security: "everything that is" becomes the object of poetic activity, therefore an area that subject to the poet's authority.

Invariably at the source of the arch-poet's strategy there lies the character of Orpheus. He symbolizes poetry as such, but from the earliest days pastoral poets considered Orpheus to be also their protagonist.<sup>21</sup> The Orphic belief in the magical, shamanistic powers of the poet and the causative character of language, *residuum* of ritual speech, language of mystery plays, can be found in the poets of the European Renaissance; in Poland, Jan Kochanowski's Song XXIV is an Orphic praise of poetic art. A rendering of Horace's famous *Exegi monumentum...* Kochanowski's Song XXIV contains the figure of the metamorphosis of rebirth ("Endowed with a pinion that is mighty and rare/ A poet of two forms, I will take to the air"<sup>22</sup> – Orpheus was often portrayed as a swan) – the birth of immortality. It is then hardly surprising that readers of poetry hear the echoes of Orphism in Białoszewski: "More durable than brass" is Irena Urbaniak's title of her reading of "Oh! Oh! Should They Take Away My Stove..." "My Inexhaustible Ode To Joy" is, one should add, a reverse elegy or an unrealized elegy, a *manque* elegy (complaint, the dirge turns into a hymn, into an incantation that is an affirmation). Language seen as an "inexhaustible source" is the cause and the legitimization of immortality, Urbaniak writes. Her title is a metaphor, the author does not refer to the Orphic tradition in the essay but the intuition did not fail her: the modern, post-mallarmean exponent of Orphisms posits the poet as an intelligence writing in verse, the language of the poem as a "singing mystery" (a mystery as it gives up on representation) and poetry itself – a figure of lost wholeness, universe that used to echo with the music of the spheres (Friedrich 153; McGahey 130).<sup>23</sup> In *The Revolution of Things*, music of the spheres resounds when "Cecylia plays the wringer" in *Tryptyk Pionowy* [Vertical Triptich].<sup>24</sup> But there are also echoes of the

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render despair impossible (...) Białoszewski's hero cannot free himself of the weight of dazzle and marvel."

<sup>21</sup> Compare: R. McGahey *The Orphic Moment. Shaman to Poet-Thinker in Plato, Nietzsche and Mallarmé*, State University of New York Press, Albany 1994, C.M. Schenck *Mourning and Panegyric...*, 2 and elsewhere, 58 and elsewhere. "The crucial link between pastoralism and Platonism, and between Arcadian and modern forms of initiatory pastoral, is Orphism." Schenck, 20

<sup>22</sup> Transl. Michael J. Mikoś

<sup>23</sup> First two expressions from H. Friedrich, *Struktura nowocześniejszej liryki* [The Structure of Modern Poetry] PIW, Warszawa (1978) 153, the latter by R. McGahey from *The Orphic Moment...* 130.

<sup>24</sup> The allusion seems clear to those familiar with *Hail! Bright Cecilia* by the „British Orpheus,” Henry Purcell, with lyric by Nicolas Brady ("Ode to Saint Cecilia"), praising music as the echo of divine harmony. Matters complicate, however, further in the poem: "Saint Cecylia in politure / wheel – manual – Emmanuel / – roller – interval – fugue." Perhaps then, it is a reference to one of the chorals by Carl Philip Emmanuel Bach, or perhaps Cecylia's name is an play on the name of one of the orchestras? Such as The Saint Cecylia Chorus & Orquestra (created in 1906) or

longing for Wholeness: the table is a sufficient reason for poem with a telling title: “Stołowa piosenka prawie o wszechbycie” [A Table Song Almost Of The Universe]. In “The Salt of Structure” seawaves seem to play Bach and the poet – Orpheus, commands them: “waves! / put on your wigs / tssss” [BCZ]. “I am all things/ and sometimes I am all things” he says “Liryka śpiącego.” [Verse Of The Sleeper]<sup>25</sup> With his sense of humor and inexhaustible linguistic ingenuity, balancing on the verge of presentation and taking advantage of the incantational power of meaningful euphonies, Białoszewski definitely could be referred to as intelligence writing verse. A singing mystery as well, one that entrusts its existence to the volatile substance of language, one that exists in a constant oscillation of meanings whose flickering figures the liminal condition of Orpheus, stretching between the Dionysian and the Apollonian.

But one should perhaps discuss one more echo of the pastoral poetic tradition in Białoszewski, namely, the element of dialogue, always present in his poems. Ancient idylls gladly used dialogue and the colloquial tone. Virgil’s “mysterious, mystically–philosophical” (in the words of its publisher) “Eclogue VI” is a monologue of Tityrus (containing utterances of others, Silenus in particular). In Theocritus’s “Idyll VII,” Simichidas introduces into his narrative his own song and the song of Lycidas.

*Agon*, or dispute, usually a poetic competition between herders in a quiet retreat, becomes a figure of argument resolved in a civilized, peaceful, even friendly manner and culminating with an exchange of gifts. Accompanying the dialogue, the speech of simple people is introduced, with its colloquial tone, the tone of argument and debate, the tone of confession. This pedigree of dialogue forms blurs gradually, with the appearance of genres of living speech, folk idiom and the language of several professions in high literature. From there, other considerations play the key role, but the beginnings of the conversational idiom in poetry are to be found in Theocritus’s idylls and Virgil eclogues – as well as the praise of the familiar represented by native land and landscape, by closest neighborhood. The interlocutor – resident of Arcadian retreats, detached from everyday obligations becomes a figure of citizen while his dialogue – a figure of debate by the free and happy. The conversation inscribed in the text is a ploy aiming at a compromise between two forms of social life: the active and the contemplative one. It allows to change the idyll of solitude for the idyll of human family. “We are not men, nor have other tie upon one another,

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Orchestra dell’ Akademia Nazionale de Santa Cecylia (1908). Białoszewski might have owned their recordings of the compositions by J.S. Bach’s son.

<sup>25</sup> Edward Balcerzan comments: „*Everything* returns: this is the foundation of the arch-poet’s strategy. In Białoszewski everything is worthy of respect because literally everything is the locus of constant metamorphoses that fascinate and render despair impossible (...) Białoszewski’s attempts to adjust to Everything. (...) His *arch-poetry* does not demand admission of its uniqueness but it attempts to become a theory of *all-poetry* (...) a theory of common poetic experience that does not set requirements reaching outside the everyday.” *Poezja polska...*, 238 and 242. It is an observation very much applicable to contemporary orphism very well!

but by our word,” Montaigne comments (87).<sup>26</sup> Unlike in modernism, Renaissance writers and readers had no doubts that the *pastoral* is an allegorical utterance and that it is concerned with ethical goals (Etlin 3).<sup>27</sup>

Montaigne's position is clear: what he is fleeing, in the final analysis, is not human society in general but "servitude and obligation"; what he cherishes is not solitude as such, but the possibility this offers to him to focus and find himself so as finally to communicate better with others. "I throw myself into affairs of state and into the world more readily when I am alone." (III, 3, 625). Solitude is the means but not the end; in Montaigne's case, it improves his sociability. (Todorov 133)<sup>28</sup>

The closer to modernity, the more intriguing the dialectic of solitude and community becomes, taking the form of aporia.<sup>29</sup> Todorov comments that for Rousseau, solitude was a treasure that allowed to avoid the trap of alienating mechanisms of worldly life. "The man of opinion," in other words – the "worldly" man, always wears a mask, Rousseau writes in *Emile*. That which he is, seems nothing to him and what he seems to be, is everything. One could say that it was Rousseau who was the first to outline the difference between *être* and *paraître*. It was also Rousseau who, already in a modern fashion, made the other a guarantee of individualized subjectivity: the social man "lives outside himself, knowing to live only in the opinion of others. And it is from their judgment alone that he derives the sense of his own judgment alone that he derives the sense of his own existence," Rousseau writes in his essay *On the Origin of Inequality Among Men* (Todorov 107).<sup>30</sup> He manages to avoid aporia: solitude, tempting with the promise of self-sufficiency but evoking fear as well, seen also as *de facto* impossible, becomes "dearly beloved solitude," as the contradiction finds in it a happy solution. Solitude is illusory, as for the writing man the presence of the reader in the text becomes a substitute of presence, while the text itself becomes a substitute for direct communication. "Writing is that paradoxical activity which demands that one flee from others in order to meet them more effectively," observes Todorov (138).<sup>31</sup> The Romantics added to this the questioning of the possibility of understanding. The subject of Mickiewicz's "To Solitude" is "an exile in both" – in the world of beloved solitude and outside of it. He is himself only in his text but he writes it provoked by the language which (as one learns from the famous line in The Great Improvisation – "Alone! Ah man!" – concerning precisely the language)

<sup>26</sup> M. de Montaigne *Próby* [Essays] Vol. 1. Transl. T. Boy-Żeleński, PIW, Warszawa (1957. 87). This particular remark refers to taking responsibility for words. After: T. Todorow *Ogród niedoskonały. Myśl humanistyczna we Francji*. transl. H. Abramowicz i J.M. Kłoczowski, Czytelnik, Warszawa (2003). 133. [Translation based on: T. Todorow, *Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism*. Princeton University Press (2002)

<sup>27</sup> A.V. Etlin *Literature and the Pastoral*, Yale University Press, New Haven (1984) 3.

<sup>28</sup> T. Todorow *Ogród niedoskonały*... 133.

<sup>29</sup> Adam Zagajewski's 1983 essay, „Solidarność i samotność” is one of the last examples.

<sup>30</sup> After T. Todorow *Ogród niedoskonały*. 107.

<sup>31</sup> Op.cit. 138.

is a deceptive occurrence, blurring and mutilating the intention of the speaker: it always means something different than it says. Can the substitute, then, take the place of the original? The latter, if accessible, is accessible without the mediation of language ("An Evening Conversation"), in a utopia of direct communication, one beyond the code, allowing to "pour the soul straight into another" ("Conversation").<sup>32</sup> For a strictly postmodern poet, such as the avant-garde Przyboś, the non-transparency of language is no longer a problem and justifies the *raison d'être* of the poet, but loneliness is undesirable and soon, fortunately, becomes impossible: the co-creative presence of the other, the reader – a future poet – is something expected and assumed, culminating in the utopian vision of the society of artists.

Białoszewski lives in the conversation, he sees it as theater *avant la lettre*. And not only that. For debuting Białoszewski, writing is a kind of conversation, even though he does not share the enthusiasm of his avant-garde predecessors with whom, after all, he had a lot in common (maybe this is precisely because the model of communication assumed by the poetry of social realism turned out to be its caricature.)

After all I speak to men  
I don't write for wardrobes only.  
Be then – O I!—humpbacked  
with the hump of humility  
before my fellow beings  
and with the hump of understanding. (*O mojej pustelni...*)

Conversation is, clearly, marked with impaired understanding but in *The Revolution of Things*, the element of conversation grows stronger, becoming a notation of speaking („Zadumanie o sieni kamienicznej”), and from one book of poems to the next acquires new senses: an ordinary conversation becomes an allegory of sociability but also of a political dialogue, disappearing or hidden in the years when Białoszewski's poems were created. The making public of the “domestic” conversation and of the private dimension results in the “domestication” of the public sphere, especially in the domestication and commonalization of the idea of culture.<sup>33</sup> This commonalization is essentially synonymous to democratization. Białoszewski is a true rarity in a Romantic, aristocratic culture laden with gentry sentiments that have always pushed manifestations of plebeianism into the sphere of shameful inferiority. His Madonnas from Raphael's paintings enjoy carousel rides in the suburbs while right next to them their neighbors, “tenants of Art Nouveau,” are asleep, the landscape of left-bank Warsaw evokes images of ancient Mesopotamia

<sup>32</sup> Mickiewicz. The dream of a communication „beyond the code,” inherited from the Romantics by the poets of Young Poland” is discussed by Jan Prokop in: „Od retoryki nadmiaru do utopii pozakodowej.” *Żywiol wyzwolony. Studium o poezji Tadeusza Micińskiego*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków (1978) 32 and elsewhere.

<sup>33</sup> Formulated by Emerson, „domestication of the idea of culture” is a realization of the Emersonian idea of an intellectual democracy and his concept of the common as a social *habitus*. This and similar Romantic concepts of democratization of culture are discussed by Cavell.

whose bazaar rams are crowned with “Aurignac aureoles” and where “sheepskins of golden Homers” hang down, the roller of the wringer turns, “wheel – manual – Emmanuel / – roller – interval – fugue,” and sheets are hung to dry by “Saint Veronica.”

This commonalization also includes his poetic diction – and not without a reason. Białoszewski’s language avoids the standards of high and ordered style. It avoids, to use Miłosz’s term, a “properly set” tone, a clear and understandable diction with no trace of the struggle with the difficulty in translating from the strange and alienating world of things to the language of the subject endowed with the ability of self-knowledge. Already Białoszewski’s debut volume suggests that there is a philosophical distrust behind his practice.

One of the first statements of Cavell’s *Must We Mean What We Say* is that we know neither what we think, nor what we mean and that the task of philosophy is to bring us to ourselves – to bring back words from their metaphysical to their everyday use, or to replace the conceptual knowledge of the world with a sensual one, or with bringing us closer to ourselves – which is not something self-evident at all and which makes the search for ordinariness the most difficult task within human reach, even if (especially because) it remains within man: “No man is in any better position for knowing it than any other man – unless wanting to know is a special position. And this discovery about himself is the same as the discovery of philosophy, when it is the effort to find answers and permit questions, which nobody knows the way to nor the answer to any better than yourself” (xiii).<sup>34</sup>

This seems self-evident to the author of *The Revolution of Things*:  
And they go round  
and round.

Piercing us in nebulae.

Try and catch  
a heavenly body  
one of those  
called “close at hand” ...

And whose tongue  
has savored to the full  
the Milky Drop of an object?

And whose idea was it  
that dimmer stars  
go round the bright ones?

And who thought up  
the dimmer stars? (“On The Revolution Of Things” [BCZ])

<sup>34</sup> S. Laugier *Koncepcja zwykłości i demokracja intelektualna*, transl. M. Apelt, *Res Publica Nowa* 2000 nr 12, s. 99. [Cavell’s quotation from: *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book Of Essays*. CUP, 2002. xiii]



The task of poetry, according to Białoszewski, is to bring us back to ourselves, lost in the labyrinths of language adopted too thoughtlessly and with too much good faith. “What is the way out of the word?” he asks („Nie umiem pisać”): how do we leave the word get to the thing without losing ourselves in the world where both the deficiency of speech and the strangeness of things hastily assumed to be extensions of ourselves lie in waiting? Reports on the meetings of mutually irreducible beings, such as the “translation of an umbrella” or “translation from the mattress” („Dwa przekłady”) is both an everyday and a most difficult practice for a poet aware of his profession.<sup>35</sup>

*Translation: Anna Warso*

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<sup>35</sup> Ryszard Nycz formulates the notion of translation from „the factual into the expressible” inspired by, „...jak to powiedzieć” from Białoszewski’s later volume, *Oho! R. Nycz, Literatura jako trop....* 226.

## Cezary ZALEWSKI

### The One Moment: Photographing in Polish Poetry of the Twentieth Century

Photography has become a frequently used device in contemporary poetry, most likely because it allows access to scenes which, having already occurred, are unique and irretrievable. On the other hand, it is sometimes confusing as a subject, as it remains devoid of semantic suggestions. What has been presented is, in the words of Ewa Lipska:

captured on film  
the one moment  
in which there was no  
time to think<sup>1</sup>

The resulting aporia seems insurmountable; the choice between a direct reception of momentary image and providing an explanatory comment. The former is usually the case, hence the large number in Polish poetry of photographic ekphrases, which, however, leave to the reader the often difficult task of reconstructing their meaning.

In this context, a more interesting, though uncommon, trend seems to be the one which tries to solve this problem differently. Instead of solely focusing on captured image, it offers a reconstruction of the process that led to its creation. The image is presented from a genetic perspective, allowing for a more explicit and clear indication of the meaning of the one, unique moment. The purpose of this essay is to present

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<sup>1</sup> Lipska, Ewa. *Żywa śmierć*. Kraków: Wydaw. Literackie, 1979. 49. Print. (translated by Paweł Pyrka)

three poetic texts that precisely for such reasons are not so much concerned with photographs as with photographing.

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The poem *Mediumicznie-magnetyczna fotografia poety Brunona Jasińskiego* ("Mediumistic-magnetic photograph of the poet Bruno Jasiński")<sup>2</sup> by Tytus Czyżewski has long puzzled its commentators, who as a result have either completely ignored it or made an effort to familiarize it, by placing in the intersemiotic or intertextual spaces (the realm of painting<sup>3</sup> or surrealism<sup>4</sup>, respectively). Undoubtedly, the poem requires a specific context, one that has been directly indicated in the title. A complete interpretation cannot, therefore, ignore the references to magnetism and mediumism, especially since these ideas were extremely popular (and recognizable) in the interwar period<sup>5</sup>. Czyżewski introduced them to the initial and final sections of his texts, thus tracing a "horizon" of sorts, upon which the photograph and photographing appear.

Participants in séances would invariably observe the appearance of a matter called ectoplasm in the proximity of the medium. Initially mist-like and formless, it would gradually take on the shape and properties of some (usually dead) person. However, according to the monographer: " "

Not all mediums possess the ability to exude enough ectoplasm to materialize a full-sized human figure. Often they are only hands, heads or busts" (105-6).<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the initial sequence of images in which there appear several separated parts of the body, is the poetic equivalent of psychic ectoplasm. This hypothesis is confirmed by both the dynamic nature of each of these visions, as well as all accompanying phenomena: the spectral flames<sup>7</sup> and a kind of telekinesis,<sup>8</sup> used to activate the keyboard instrument (95-6; 94).

<sup>2</sup> Czyżewski, Tytus. *Noc--dzień: Mechaniczny Instynkt Elektryczny*. Kraków: Skład Główny: Gebethner i Wolff, 1922. 30. Print. (translated by Paweł Pyrka)

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Pollakówna, Joanna. "Spełnienie Dwoiste (Uwagi O Twórczości Tytusa Czyżewskiego)." *Poezja* 1 (1969): 40.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Lipski, Jan Józef. "O Poezji Tytusa Czyżewskiego." *Twórczość* 6 (1960): 74-75. Print.; Śniecikowska, Beata. *Słowo--obraz--dźwięk: Literatura I Sztuki Wizualne W Koncepcjach Polskiej Awangardy, 1918-1939*. Kraków: Universitas, 2005. 120-123. Print.

<sup>5</sup> As shown in numerous publications of the period. The most important include: *Mediumizm współczesny i wielkie media polskie* (Modern Mediumism and Great Polish Mediums), Kraków 1936, *Spirytyzm współczesny* (Modern Spiritism), Kraków 1936, both by Ludwik Szczepański and *Okultyzm i magia w świetle parapsychologii* (Occultism, Magic and Parapsychology), Lwów 1939, by Józef Świtkowski. It is worth noting that authors of those texts use the terminology introduced by Julian Ochorowicz at the turn of the century.

<sup>6</sup> Świtkowski, Józef. *Okultyzm I Magia W świetle Parapsychologii*. Lwów: Nakł. Red. Miesięcznika "Lotos", 1939. 105-106. (translated by Paweł Pyrka)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 95-96

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 94.

However, Czyżewski clearly modifies the course of the séance, using a simultaneous technique. He emphasizes three times that all of these “activities” take place at the same time, though (almost) each of them in a different location. There is even a parallelism that arranges both somatic and spatial components based in relation to the “center”. The farther the vision is located (adjacent room, kitchen, bathroom, corners of the living room), the more external parts of the body (hands, brain, eyes, legs, fingers, hair) take part in it, and vice versa: the closer to the medium, the more “inward” is the nature of the images (spine, lungs). However, the final vision seems to break this rule:

heart stops beating  
and is at this moment  
inside the chalice inside the tabernacle

Thus, the heart becomes the center of somatic order, while space is radically transformed: the interior of the house is replaced with the (secret) inner sanctum of a temple. This spatial shift is not dysfunctional, however, as it signals the passage into the sphere of another ritual. The eccentric spiritual séance becomes what Julian Ochorowicz called magnetic sleep (172-5).<sup>9</sup> In fact, it probably always was magnetic sleep, especially if we interpret the onomatopoeia in the opening line as the sound equivalent of the magnetizer’s gestures designed to put the magnetized person to sleep.

In order, therefore, appears somatic center (heart), and the space is radically changed: instead of the house is shown (most secret) inside the temple. Special Weekend displacement is not dysfunctional, because it signals another move in the sphere of ritual. This *udziwniony seance* is in fact what Julian Ochorowicz called magnetic sleep. The onomatopoeia in the opening line most likely can be interpreted as referring to the sound equivalent of movements that the magnetizer makes as they magnetize the subject to put them to sleep (209).<sup>10</sup>

The further course is then related as follows:  
you are telling me in your sleep  
you are at the ceiling of a Gothic cathedral  
and you cease to live  
you drown in orange water  
I wake you I        wake you

According to Ochorowicz, magnetic sleep (as opposed to hypnosis) does not subdue people, instead leaving them active so they can experience their state internally and verbalize it, independent of the magnetizer. However, only the magnetizer can end the experience, interrupting the sleep in a similar fashion to how it was induced (thus, in Czyżewski’s poem, the graphic form of the last line corresponds to the distribution of the opening onomatopoeia).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Ochorowicz, Julian. *Psychologia I Medycyna. Cz. II*. Warszawa: Skł. Gł. W Księgarni Gebethnera I Wolffa, 1917. 172-175. Print.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 209.

The poet brilliantly managed to combine two occult practices. Ectoplasmic visions turn into dreamlike images, thanks to the sacred space, in which the (psychic) séance “ends,” and (magnetic) sleep “begins.” The two rituals are different, use different means of articulation, but the extent of their experience seems to be similar. The difference is in the perspective; the original medium first materializes their experience on the outside, and then talks from the inside, relating their own sleep. Czyżewski chose Brunon Jasiński to be the “object” of both rituals in order to faithfully recreate the extreme sensations. They revolve around the slow yet inevitable fading of life. The first approach emphasizes the somatic aspect of death, causing disintegration of the body and the slow destruction of all of its parts. The second perspective on the other hand focuses on subjective sensations (anxiety) and experience of death, which, as in the case of drowning, comes too suddenly.

Only now the poet decides to introduce the device promised by the title:  
 I set the camera  
 light the magnetic aurora  
 and I see your face  
 lit from the side by the glow of fires  
 I bathe the film in golden water  
 I copy to bromide paper  
 and I conjure your spectral face

A parapsychologist would probably remark that photographing at that moment is already late. Taking pictures was essential, but was always conducted during the séance or magnetic sleep.<sup>11</sup> The goal was to produce objective and irrefutable evidence that paranormal phenomena exist,<sup>12</sup> and should therefore be systematically explored.

Czyżewski's intention is different. He does not intend to subject the photograph to science as the artistic effect of such an operation is always limited. Photos from séances present that which is extraordinary in terms of what is known and familiar. The avant-garde artist's strategy is exactly the opposite: Jasiński portrait is created “after” a series of extraordinary effects, but in a manner that makes it possible to recover them. That which is ordinary will thus appear as uncanny and amazing.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Szczepański, Ludwik. *Medjumizm Współczesny I Wielkie Medja Polskie*. Kraków: Nakładem Wydawnictwa "Nauka I Kultura", 1936. 65-67. Print. and Świtkowski, Józef. *Okultyzm I Magia W świetle Parapsychologii*. Lwów: Nakł. Red. Miesięcznika "Lotos", 1939. 125-130. Print.

<sup>12</sup> This was the function of the photograph of ectoplasm In Gabriela Zapolska's *Fin-de-sièclista* (1897). Here Helena is trying to convince her adversary (translated by Paweł Pyrka):

“The photographs you see before you are not from the realm of wonders. They are positive and material objects. They are the shells of our material ‘self,’ which even though not visible to all, were quite apparent to Indian anchorites.” (Zapolska, Gabriela. *Fin-de-siècle'istka, Powieść*. Kraków: Wydawn. Literackie, 1958. 446.)

<sup>13</sup> Photographing appears to have a similar function in Antoni Słonimski's *Negatyw*, but here the object of interest is not a person:

The very act of taking a photograph (flash of light) and its production (submerging the paper) contains metonymic references to the two rituals. The final result also exhibits this relation: dread caused by deathly sleep probably appears in the poet's eyes, while the face takes on a spectral quality – it is dead and separated from the body.

The mediumistic-magnetic photograph thus presents a synthesis, portraying death from the perspectives of the subject and of the object, simultaneously.

### II

Stanisław Barańczak's *Widokówka z tego świata* (A Postcard from this World) is a poetic synthesis of the metaphysical and concrete experience; the clearer the presentation of "local" earthly reality, the stronger the emphasis on the metaphysical. The poem *Zdjęcie*<sup>14</sup> (Photo) seems to be an exception to this rule, as it shows the eponymous situation in manner that is stereotypical, too brief and apparently devoid of genuine reference. It is probably for this reason that identification of its universal dimension is not obvious and still incomplete<sup>15</sup>.

It seems, however, that Barańczak deliberately used a schematic approach to indicate a larger number of phenomena. The process of cropping a picture, represented by the photographer's monologue, refers in fact to a whole range of other cultural practices that exist in American society, practices which the poet, as "stranger," immediately notices. In deciphering them we find most valuable the reflections of another "tourist," Jean Baudrillard, who was in American more or less at the same time.

They seem especially important when we consider that Barańczak, as befits a student of English metaphysical poets, chooses antithesis as the conceit of his poem. It is organized analogically to the process of photographing; the poet begins by adopting a negative strategy, outlining what will not be included in the frame, then moves to the proper presentation of what the photo will show. However, tensions can be observed not only between the two perspectives – both contain internal dissonances constructed using the technique of zooming in and out.

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I will set up my tripod,  
And with the hiss of magnesium  
Take a huge negative  
Turning clouds of day into everyday shadow  
Pulsing poeticality into pounding of poetry  
And walls of dust into cathedral gloom.

(Słonimski, Antoni. *Godzina Poezji*. Warszawa: Ignis, 1923. 63.)

(translated by Paweł Pyrka)

<sup>14</sup> Barańczak, Stanisław. *Widokówka Z Tęgo świata: I Inne Rymy Z Lat 1986-1988*. Paryż: Zeszyty Literackie, 1988. 42. Print. (translated by Paweł Pyrka)

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Kandziora, Jerzy. "Obserwator Zaświatów. O Wierszach Metafizycznych Stanisława Barańczaka." *W Drodze* 1 (1990): 98. Print. and Lubaszewska, Antonina. "W Daguerotyp Raczej Pióro Zmieniam." *Teksty Drugie* 4 (1999): 178-79. Print.

The first stage is as follows:  
Don't move; yes, that's it;  
I'll just wait for the people  
to pass and issues too  
with which you have too little  
in common; oh, this is good;  
let me just zoom in to  
remove from the frame  
millions of unnecessary  
misfortunes and words

The act of removal is both physical (of people, words), and metaphorical, or internal (of issues, misfortunes). This parallelism implies, however, a certain vision that is worth reconstructing. If no other people appear around the photographed subject and all experience related to their presence disappears, it would mean the portrait is totally focused on the individual dimension of the person, making the representation idyllic. Instead of signs indicating a difficult experience, the face now probably shows a beaming smile.

Such an image is, on the one hand, typical (especially for photography), but, on the other hand, it suggests a specific “style of behavior,” functioning in American society. When Baudrillard wondered what the nature of the common phenomenon of showing joy was, he came to the conclusion that its artificial, studied character acts as a mask, at the same time covering and creating distance. In America, therefore, the following principle seems to apply:

Smile if you have nothing to say. Most of all, do not hide the fact you have nothing to say nor your total indifference to others. Let this emptiness, this profound indifference shine out spontaneously in your smile. *Give* your emptiness and indifference to others, light up your face with the zero degree of joy and pleasure, smile, smile, smile.<sup>16</sup>

Barańczak seems to agree with Baudrillard's diagnosis. By removing others from the frame (i.e. beyond the sphere of life), the resulting individualism becomes a paradox, since it produces a vacuum devoid of subjectivity. A chasm impossible to “cover” even with such a good strategy, the ubiquitous, self-satisfied smile.

In the second stage the photographer changes his method:  
oh yes, stand still  
just like that, let me just set  
focus to capture your dream  
while awake, your  
  
shadow; yes, this is the  
expression, the pose;  
I'll just step back maybe  
to blur a bit

<sup>16</sup> Baudrillard, Jean, and Chris Turner (transl.). *America*. London etc.: Verso, 1988. 34. Print.

## Czesław Miłosz and the Polish School of Poetry

the lines  
in the face, on the wall in the background;  
yes, great, these are the  
thoughts, no others

The positive presentation shows even stronger dissonance. On the one hand, the portrait will be made accurately, so that, again, the external appearance will reflect the inner experience (dream, thoughts) of the subject. On the other hand, the presentation will be done from a distance, eliminating all details.

From a cultural perspective the dissonance is clearly weakened. The intention to capture a precise and multi-faceted image of a person seems analogous to the practice of detailed filming, which Americans, according to Baudrillard often cultivate. The essence of this activity, however, is pure self-reference:

Video, everywhere, serves only this end: it is a screen of ecstatic refraction. As such, it has nothing of the traditional image or scene, or of traditional theatricality, and its purpose is not to present action or allow self-contemplation; its goal is *to be hooked up to itself*.

Obtained in this way, the self-reflexivity reminds us of “a short-circuit which immediately hooks up like with like, and, in so doing, emphasizes their surface intensity and deeper meaninglessness.”<sup>17</sup>

Thus a photograph, even one focused on the “internal analysis,” also participates in the ecstasy of communication. It becomes a doubling, a mirror image of the same. Simultaneously, however, it remains “empty,” offering no identification or self-knowledge, only tautological repetition.

If so, then a photograph inevitably forsakes its unique, strictly individual aspect; a copy of one person is no different from a copy of someone else. All are equally silent, and thus could be seen as, paradoxically, the more accurate, the more blurred and unclear they are. By contaminating these two opposing “images,” Barańczak again exposes the nature of American illusions. Because if anyone can exhibit a narcissistic tendency (thanks to photography), then on a larger scale everyone is the same in this regard.

The strategy of demystification serves to integrate this antithetical poem and that is why the poet uses it consistently. The final part of the monologue reads as follows:

a snapshot: let time,  
its laugh unsympathetic  
be quiet  
for a blink of a shutter;  
  
yes, finally, stay this way a moment;  
though it's already dusk,  
and there's just one left  
a single-use flash



The shift of focus from what will or will not be in the frame to the mechanics of the camera not only signals the final stage of taking the photo, but also presents its justification. The mechanism works like any other American device, whose principal purpose is to ignore the natural order; the snap of the shutter and the flash of light at dusk suggest the persistence of the mechanical. This is just an example of a broader phenomenon, one which so intrigued Baudrillard:

Everything has to be working all the time, there has to be no let-up in man's artificial power, and the intermittent character of natural cycles (the seasons, day and night, heat and cold) has to be replaced by a functional continuum that is sometimes absurd... You may seek to explain this in terms of fear, perhaps obsessional fear, or say that this unproductive expenditure is an act of mourning. (68)<sup>18</sup>

Thus photographs appear to not only generate narcissistic delusion, but in the final analysis seem to confirm the aspirations which aim to negate the passage of time and its consequences. However, this effort is as pointless as it is energetic; a photograph at the very moment it is taken becomes the proof of loss, a permanent work of mourning.

III

In the poetry of Janusz Szuber photographs appear as frequently, as unambiguously. Regardless of whether they belong in the family album or not, their origin is always distant, often dating to nineteenth century. Viewing such images is sometimes risky, however, since, as Susan Sontag pointed out, most of them

do not keep their emotional charge. A photograph of 1900 that was affecting then because of its subject would, today, be more likely to move us because it is a photograph taken in 1900. The particular qualities and intentions of photographs tend to be swallowed up in the generalized pathos of time past. (21)<sup>19</sup>

Szuber avoids the nostalgic sentimentality by showing a dramatic contrast between what is old and what is current. He uses for this purpose two different techniques. The first, described by Andrzej Sulikowski,<sup>20</sup> carefully reconstructs the concrete elements of a photograph and its presentation is imbued with sympathy in an attempt to reach what is deepest in the people portrayed. The second method, and one rather rarely used, focuses on the intentions that accompanied the very act of photographing. An example of its implementation is the poem *Eliasz Puret z fotografuje uczennice z Wyższego Instytutu Naukowo-Wychowawczego w S. podczas majówki*

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 68.

<sup>19</sup> Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Picador USA, 2001. 21. Print. N.B. Julian Tuwim's poem *Ryciny* (presenting 19<sup>th</sup> century daguerreotypes) is a good illustration of how pathos appropriates the viewer's perspective. (Tuwim, Julian. *Biblia Cygańska I Inne Wiersze*. Warszawa: J. Morkowicz, 1935. 79-80. Print.)

<sup>20</sup> Sulikowski, Andrzej. "Twórczość Poetycka Janusza Szubera." *Pamiętnik Literacki* 2 (2004): 113-14. Print.

*w roku 1902*<sup>21</sup> (“Eliasz Puret看 photographing schoolgirls from the Higher Institute of Educational Science in S. during the picnic in May 1902”).

The long, almost baroque, title describes a lyrical situation that is the “starting point” for further reflection. Szuber begins with the presentation of the photographer’s actions, aimed at achieving the most appropriate framing. However, this process takes place not only at the technical level, as it is accompanied by a reflection.

In the shadow of tin butterfly wings,  
in straw hats tied with ribbon,

In tight corsets their untight bodies,  
of which each one might say:

less mine more mine never quite mine.

The photographer tries to zoom in on the schoolgirls standing in front of the lens, since the details that he points out allow for separation and isolation, only to finally focus on whole figures. However, there is no presentation of faces, as if the presence of too many people prevented individual characterization. Instead, the photographer’s reflection focuses on the one element of dress common to all girls.

It is significant that here the corset does not function in the temporal perspective,<sup>22</sup> but first and foremost in an anthropological one. The process of framing involves isolating elements based on the difference between what is artificial (tin butterfly, straw hat) and natural, but when the photographer is trying to capture the closest exemplification of this opposition, it turns out that it is unstable. A corset is supposed to impose a shape on a body that nonetheless eludes its constraints, thus disrupting the clear arrangement. Otherwise there would exist a complete separation of the two orders; from the point of view of the subject, any access to their body would be perfectly mediated. Therefore, the photographer uses conditional mood to state that the somatic experience of any of the schoolgirls would not be direct, but rather conventional or solely cultural. However, the fluidity of this boundary suggests that this pure unmediated experience is not only available to the schoolgirls standing in front of the lens, but it is also recognized by the photographer watching them.

This was the intention behind taking the picture or, more carefully, this is the intention inferred and attributed by someone who much later looks at the effects of photographer’s work. The lyrical monologue moves smoothly from the perspective of the photograph’s author to that of an observer, while echoing slightly the previous reflections and introducing new ones:

<sup>21</sup> Szuber, Janusz. *O Chłopcu Mieszającym Powidła: Wiersze Wybrane 1968-1997*. Kraków: Znak, 1999. 24. Print (translated by Paweł Pyrka)

<sup>22</sup> Unlike In Jerzy Ficowski’s *Dedykacja* which employs a temporal perspective:

In a ginger photograph  
a face above a corset a wrap  
in a cocoon of oldfashion

Ficowski, Jerzy. *Śmierć Jednorożca*. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawn., 1981. 29. Print. (translated by Paweł Pyrka)

And having what they had no longer  
than it takes a camera lens to  
blink, already faded and passed to strangers  
who will invent other thighs for those stockings  
and for loose white bloomers.

Self-experience, forming the basis of identity for each of the girls, is thus impermanent and momentary. Their private, biographical sphere remains concealed here, but it seems that it runs similar to how the image continues to function. Both in their (later) life, and in a (faded) photograph, the students will be watched, observed by others. Szuber clearly emphasizes the creative aspect of the process; a stranger's look constitutes the somatic dimension, especially in its (hinted at) erotic dimension. The autonomy observed by the photographer is thus fragile, a sort of instantaneous epiphany of the self, which almost immediately must be surrendered to the process of mediation which builds identity through the influence of others.

The final stanza reveals a conclusion drawn from the juxtaposition of the two perspectives:

Modestly hidden for ever exposed  
asks cruel mercy that one once lived  
that day month year that minute of inattention.

The poet-observer avoids visualization, which would "one more time" recreate the physicality of the schoolgirls. However, he is intrigued by the mere possibility of this operation, as it attests to the defenseless, so to speak, status of photographic representation. The more the women try to hide from the eyes of others, the stronger they affect them, stimulating behaviors leading to various forms of appropriation.

The poet senses, however, that this is not the effect the photographer had in mind and in his name, as well as his own, he recalls the original intent. The uniqueness of the photograph is in the way it (perhaps accidentally) captures a moment of inner epiphany, which should be admired, not manipulated. Of course, such mercy will always be cruel, burdened with the knowledge that neither the schoolgirls, nor their innocent self-perception are there anymore.

#### IV

In the poems discussed above, photographing is not an autonomous (but technical) activity, insofar as it is included in a broader context, i.e. marked with the textual references to other types of discourse. In Czyżewski's poem the references can be traced back to the occult spiritualism, while Barańczak adopts a civilizational perspective (focused on America), and Szuber an anthropological one. It seems, therefore, that the relationship between a range of photographic expositions and the type and frame of reference is based on the prominence of the local context. The more specific it is (possibly for various reasons), the more accurate and broader the presentation of photographing (Czyżewski, Barańczak). And conversely, the more

universal is the type of reflection employed, the less attention is devoted to specific activities (Szuber). Thus, paradoxically, the less abstract discourse possesses more explanatory power, as it is applicable to different aspects of the photographic process.

It seems significant, however, that regardless of these differences, all three texts use the context in a similar way. It explains the photograph in an almost identical fashion, leading to the conclusion of a thanatological nature. However, thanks to the juxtaposition of these poems, we can also observe a sort of feedback effect: photographing (and photography) can now be used to penetrate different discourses, uncovering in them a more or less hidden fascination with death.

The differences between the poems are therefore visible only in the way they approach that fundamental question, which is reflected in the texts' structuring of lyrical situations. Czyżewski chooses to observe first the model (and his vision), and then the finished photograph. Barańczak ignores both these elements and focuses on the middle one, showing the process of framing of the image. Szuber presents both framing, and observation of the final effect (however conducted by someone else). That is because in Czyżewski death is observable from the beginning and photography is there simply to document it; whereas Barańczak equates the two processes, presenting a thanatological aspect of everything within civilization, and Szuber assumes that death is a temporal phenomenon, possible to capture only when the past compared with the present. In other words, the poems about photography present mortality "before," "in," and "after" the actions of man, both in practice, and in theory.

*Translation: Paweł Pyrka*

## **Tomasz ŁYSAK**

### Miron Białoszewski as Interpreted by Czesław Miłosz: Four Translations

Any translation, and especially any translation of poetry, is inextricably tied with interpretation. It involves the interpretation of all aspects of the text, from the apparently most trivial ones, such as its graphic conventions, to the complexities of the multi-valued semantics of the text. The ambiguity of expressions in a given language requires interpretive and translational operations within the linguistic system. The degree of organization of poetic discourse poses unique difficulties in translation, unseen in texts devoid of poetic function. Differences in the intonational and prosodic patterns of source and target language, which can be observed, among others, in the assessment of rhythmical formations based on the “natural” (dominant) rhythm of the language, can be the cause of problems in translation. Should the translation then involve the use of the same rhythmical units, which would mean going against the characteristics of the target language, or their statistical counterparts, thus submitting to the tyranny of phonetic usage? Another type of challenge in the translation of poetry is any attempt to introduce into the target language forms specific to a particular cultural or literary context. The most difficult case would be one that tests the consistency of the source language system, both in terms of its purely formal aspects and aesthetic function. It then becomes glaringly evident that translation must necessarily involve the creation of a “new” text, whose shadow in some ways obscures the source, being at the same time its counterpart. In less metaphorical terms it could be said that something always happens at the expense of something else. Those unavoidable choices prevent equipping the translated work with the complementarity of the original. Otherwise the translation would become a treatise of endless footnotes.

Miron Białoszewski’s poetry seems to have been written so as to be a translator’s worst nightmare. Considering the effort it requires to translate it “from Polish into

ours,” such perception is not surprising. Still, the task has been undertaken and by someone with “natural” skill at translating poetry.

Translations published in *Postwar Polish Poetry*<sup>1</sup> (first edition in 1965 and third edition, expanded, in 1983) include five of Białoszewski’s early works: “And Even, Even If They Take Away the Stove” (*Ach, gdyby, gdyby nawet piec zabrali*); “A Ballad of Going Down to the Store” (*Ballada o zejściu do sklepu*); “Garwolin a Town for Ever” (*Garwolin miastko na zawsze* – not discussed in this essay); “Self-Portrait as Felt” (*Autoportret odczuwany*); and “My Jacobean Fatigues: My Jacobs of Tiredness” (*Moje jakuby znużenia*).

At first glance, the poems (“And Even...” and *Ach gdyby...*) use different editing for the titles. The translation retains the English convention, while Polish editions follow Polish typography (with some anthologies capitalizing only the first word, and others rendering the whole title in capitals). Quotation marks disappear in translation, together with the ellipsis at the end of the title. The introduction of italics (present in the translation of all titles) does not compensate for the missing quotation marks. The mechanism of transaction can be observed in the way the two-verse structure of the original title is divided and in the transformation that the second verse undergoes as a result. The change in print size, accompanied by a graphical separation of the two lines, reduces the second line to a kind of commentary (in an effort to express the role of *Moja niewyczerpana oda do radości*). Paradoxically, this change does not involve any drastic change of tension between the two parts of the title. On the other hand, the translator decided not to further emphasize the quoted verse.

The first three pseudo-stanzas retain their character in translation, both in terms of layout, as well as organization of individual lines. Syntactic parallelisms are preserved: “Mam piec – Zabierają mi piec – Oddajcie mi piec” (*I have a stove – They take away my stove – Give me back my stove*), and the proximity of the translation to the original can be observed in the identical distribution of the components of the utterance (repeated syntactic arrangement). Especially noteworthy are only the additional spaces between the final word and the exclamation mark, and the spaces between individual exclamation marks. Such graphical fragmentation enhances the expressive force of exclamations. On the other hand, this layout may result from the editor’s preferences.

Further on, the “exact” method of translation (word for word; precise transposition of graphic arrangement) is abandoned in favor of a more free approach. The line *They took it away* („Zabrali”), which expresses despair, grief and the acceptance of fate, is attached to the segment:

What remains is

a grey

naked

hole

<sup>1</sup> Miłosz, Czesław. *Postwar Polish Poetry: An Anthology*. 3rd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

The shift preserves the principle of “conservation of mass,” following the ellipsis of the final line of the original stanza („szara naga jama”), which concluded the stair-like progression of the sharp left margin.<sup>2</sup> It seems obvious that in this case that the period is transferred to the end of a stair-like division: “szara / naga / jama.” The final pseudo-stanza consistently omits one variation (or realization) of the cluster: “sza-ra-na-ga-ja-ma”, impossible to render in English, because of monosyllabic structure of words (apart from *naked*) in the cluster *greynakedhole*. In addition, the euphonic effect disappears, since the perfect vowel alliteration of the original has no equivalent, either on the level of vowels, or compensated by consonants. Thus, it is impossible to distort the sense of belonging of individual syllables to particular words, which, in Polish, evokes associations with the syllabic Japanese language. Of the two options: to remain faithful to the “letter” of the text or to retain its literary conceit, the translator chose the former, while removing the elements which would be non-functional in the translation. This is what happened to the indentation at the beginning of the line “szara.” Not even “szaranagajama” remains since, according to the translator, “such a whim” is essentially devoid of function and does not contribute to the translation. As for other minor differences in punctuation, it is worth mentioning the colon at the end of the line: “I to mi wystarczy.” which has been replaced with a semicolon in *And this is enough for me*;. In the original the colon’s role was to break the necessary fragmentation of lines, to constitute a sort of “opening.” On the other hand, the semicolon separates the self-referential statement by the speaker (*And this is enough for me*;) from the subject of that statement.

The translation of “Ode” can be characterized as a dictionary realization, or one based on simple semantic equivalence. On the other hand, it could be accused of excessive conservatism and consequent elimination of non-functional elements. While there can be no objection to its correctness, the translation leaves the reader unsatisfied. It sacrifices too much, without offering a comparable poetic effect in return.

In contrast the poem “A Ballad of Going Down to the Store” is an example of translatability. Once again, the translation reveals a discrepancy in typographic conventions – the first word of the first verse is printed in capitals with no aspirations to create additional focus for arrangement. Apart from this, the translation remains close to the original. This can be attributed to the balladic quality of the text devoid of traps. The original itself invites an economical translation technique. Few departures from the standard language, such as the use of complementary forms of “zeszedłem” (bordering on incorrectness) have no counterpart in translated text. Other differences are limited to punctuation as required by English. The first line of the pseudo-stanza *I Entered ...* ends in an opening of sorts (“:.”), while in the original it clearly functions as closure (“;”). The reason for such a procedure is revealed in the following line, where instead of a comma, which would promise continuation, a period appears, thus disrupting the sentence character of the whole pseudo-stanza.

<sup>2</sup> Sharp margin is used to introduce a change either in the object or the manner of perception. Cf. W. Sadowski, *Tekst graficzny Białoszewskiego*, Warsaw 1999. p. 46.

It is clear that the changes follow the economy of the text, only occasionally rearranging the emphases. The absence of punctuation in the last segment of the original is not retained: the comma after the first line not only separates the repetitions, but necessitates “taking a breath” between the lines. While *Ballada...* does not insist on clear end-of-line pauses, “A Ballad...” clearly indicates its delimitation units. These minor differences do not change the fact that the English text follows the Polish original, limiting the changes within the acceptable economy of expression. It should be emphasized, however, that here the translator would not be faced with choices so radical as in the case of “And Even ...”

A quick comparison of *Autoportret odczuwalny* with “Self-Portrait as Felt” reveals the lack of lines in consisting wholly of dashes. Such a grouping of typographic characters stresses not only a different writing convention (absence of text is not simply noticeable, but rather specifically indicated), but also the status of the line. The procedure to replace an empty verse with a marker of absence does not have the same function as leaving a space between lines. While an empty verse breaks the stanza apart, one “burdened” with typography locates itself clearly within its tissue. Miłosz’s decision to remove the line containing only dashes cannot be easily explained. The ellipsis found in the second pseudo-stanza serves to assemble the latter into one continuous whole. However, the omission present in the last pseudo-stanza (*Autoportret*) results in its division into two smaller units. At first glance, this may seem inconsistent. While the replaced units have the same graphical representation, the substitutions have opposite effects: a complete ellipsis vs. a line with removed typography. After all, the form of the text already allows (on the most superficial level) for both readings. To choose between them (as it happens in translation) is to extract the form (or some of its features) from the realm which generates (potential) meaning, by assigning to it a fixed conventionalized (present) meaning. Removal of the graphical elements is also an aesthetic statement: form is treated as a matter of secondary importance to the content, and thus can be modified in accordance with the accepted mode of interpretation.

It is worth taking a closer look at the two enjambments which were abandoned in the translation: “Zawsze jednak / pełza we mnie” (*Yet always is crawling in me*), and “Noszę sobą / jakieś swoje własne / miejsce” (*I bear by myself / a place of my own*). In the first enjambment the predicator is detached from an adverbial – the translation restores the relationship, while retaining the inversion within the syntactic structure with the subject postponed to the end of the sentence:

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Zawsze jednak<br>pełza we mnie           | <i>Yet always is crawling in me<br/>full or not full</i> |
| pełne czy też niepełne,<br>ale istnienie | <i>existence</i>   |

“Self-Portrait” removes (purges) elements that would emphasize the distance between the speaker and the content. By avoiding contrastive conjunctions, which only



“blur the vision”, the translation formulates statements in a more direct manner. A similar “cleansing” takes place as the second enjambment is deleted:

|                            |                          |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Noszę sobą                 | <i>I bear by myself</i>  |
| <i>jakieś swoje własne</i> | <i>a place of my own</i> |
| <i>Miejsce</i>             |                          |

The accumulation of expressions highlighting “selfness” might seem as inept translation of: ““*jakieś swoje własne*”. What in Polish is an enumeration of “*swoje*” and “*własne*”, in English constitutes one collocation “my own”. “My own” is after all both “*własne*”, but also etymologically “*swoje własne*”. The reason for the deletion of the enjambment was thus a conscious decision to include the phrase a place of my own. This arrangement, by using the indefinite article *a*, expresses the perceptual elusiveness of place as space. The place, which in the original escapes all determination. In translated text there is no escape, as it is caught between indeterminacy (*a*) and definite belonging (*my own*). Therefore, moving *my own* to the next line would be completely meaningless. Polish syntactic pattern would make it impossible to express the meaning of “*jakieś*” through the article *a*. (one possible rendering would be: *my own / place*).

What is different in the two cases of missing enjambment to the faithfulness to word order in Polish (and its semantic implications). The omission of the first enjambment does not disrupt the syntax of the original pseudo-stanza. The second ellipsis, however, focuses, through transposition, on the most accurate representation of the transient nature of the word “*miejsce*” (acting in the role of an object). The above examples show that the interpretation adopted by the translator, while being a reduction (in terms of form), is not reductionist, as the changes can be explained both within the realm of the “new” text and in confrontation with the original.

“My Jacobean Fatigues: My Jacobs of Tiredness” (*Moje Jakuby znużenia*) is a poem which most visibly illustrates Miłosz’s translation practice as applied to Białoszewski’s texts. It is impossible not to address the extension of the title from one phrase: “*Moje Jakuby znużenia*” to two, apparently redundant versions – main: “My Jacobean Fatigues” (My Jacobean trouble/problems) and secondary (the translation of the proper title): “My Jacobs of Tiredness.” The omission of the poem’s dedication to Artur Sandauer is not surprising as it would not be understandable to English-speaking readers; however, the sort of compensatory multiplication of the title seems puzzling.

Once again the translator manipulates the “look” of the text, abandoning the graphical play of some lines being shifted away from the left margin. The positioning in relation to the margin in the translated text is the same for all lines. The first pseudo-stanza consisting of six lines has a very symmetrical structure: the first and fourth line start from the left margin. Onsets of these short lines (in the case of the first, the onset is also the end of the line) not only have opposite meanings,

but the positioning of “Wyżej” and “Najniżej” allow for graphical representation of the spatial arrangement of represented world. The two poles are “incidentally” grammatically (semantically) related: “wyżej” (higher) and “najniżej” (lowest). The proximity of the two words is emphasized by their positioning; a vertical reading brings closer the two points, that of what is observed („wyżej”) and that of the observer („Najniżej – ja”). The translation focuses on highlighting the contrast by breaking the first pseudo-stanza into two smaller ones, and additionally abandoning the shift in positioning. The phonological and morphological similarity between the two words describing height also disappears as a consequence of different rules which govern gradation of adjectives in English (Higher and Lowest). Without the shifted adjectives, the translated poem appears somehow “slimmer” when compared to the original, but this impression is not validated semantically, unless secondarily, when juxtaposed with the original.

The alignment of the text to the left results in the loss of graphical arrangement which highlighted specific grammatical form, that of comparative and superlative adjective. The first set of adjectives is followed by another: “ale gorzej” and “gorzej.” The connection between them is disturbed (or enhanced) by a series of four consecutive negative sentences (also aligned).

With the system of alternating indentations the text ceases to be just a poem; it becomes a graphic text in which the visual aspect is no less important, but perhaps even more important, than the phenomena resulting from its the reading. Miłosz’s interpretation appears to be focused on reading, one performed against the need to watch rather than recite that is inscribed in the text. His translation is not limited to changing the medium (language), but it also interferes with the genre and identity of the work. The resulting simplification is clearly aimed at the presentation of the content (in the ordinary sense), while ignoring the semantic implications of graphic form.

On the level of language, the translation also surrenders the text’s semantic and syntactic polyvalence. “[H]ejnały kształtu zamieszkiwania dotyku” is expressed in two lines separated by a comma (just like the third element of the list). It should be noted, however, that in order to reflect the connection between “kształtu” and “zamieszkiwania”, the preposition of would have to be used, which would nullify the primary, enumerative, function of the list.

In the second half of the pseudo-stanza, the apparent pause (a comma could be inserted after “Najniżej – ja”) appears in translation as a period at the end of the line, thus creating a clear dividing line. This division does not stand out in the original; it seems that there is an organic connection between the speaking subject and reality. In the end it is out of the hero’s breast that the steps of reality emerge. The placement of the speaker’s determinations in front of the specific points of reference for the negation “Nie tylko nie jestem / którymś z testamentowych bohaterów”, and later “ale gorzej niż fładra (i.e. me, by default – T.Ł.) / przylepiona do dna na zdychanie”, confirms the lack of compatibility between the hero and his world. This effect disappears in the translation, in which, surprisingly, the graphic arrangement

acts as a semantic unifier for the text. The dramatic tone of the final appeal of the original: "Uderz mnie / konstrukcjo mojego świata!!" is lost as a result. The original's mass of text may "strike" visually, but the translation has stripped the blow of all its power through unified graphic form. The potential energy of the original could release true power (and collapse the construction of the world). In comparison, Miłosz's translation resembles a stuffed tiger in the museum, which frightens only in the moment we forget where we are. The only trace of the dissonance between the hero and his world that is graphically highlighted in the translation is the additional period in the first pseudo-stanza, but such representation of dissonance is probably not enough to justify the "cosmic" disaster. It is therefore somewhat by chance that the character in the translated text avoids the true force of the impact.

The examples analyzed above illustrate how even a correct translation can provide a different reading of the poet's words. Some decisions made by the translator can be seen as more or less justified, but it seems clear that the translated text tries to follow the content of the original as closely as possible (in the ordinary sense), sacrificing experimentation for the sake of clarity. Although it could be expected that the experimental features of the original were reflected in the "new" text, the benefits of such an approach did not seem significant enough to the translator. Instead, he tried to carefully express that which in his interpretation is the essence of "białoszewski-ness".

*Translation: Paweł Pyrka*

# Janusz SŁAWIŃSKI

Unassigned (XV)

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*Poetry of the Time of Martial Law* is an immense body of poetic texts, created and received as a response to what the colloquial language has recorded under the name of “Jaruzelski’s war.” If the beginning of this kind of poem-writing is clearly marked by the date of 13 December 1981, the end of this practice appears somewhat blurred over time. It can be assumed that the martial law, regardless of its suspensions and terminations, continued as a poetically open reality up to 1983, but not later. It was then that it started to shift in the public consciousness from the position of lived and felt present to that of a memory of yesterday, which, albeit not completely closed, was gradually being obscured by the experience the next day.

When speaking of poetry of the martial law, we explicitly indicate its constitutive aspect – the particular mode(s) of communication, which gave birth to this poetry and at the same time placed upon it an indelible stigma: it was the kind of work un-thinkable outside the specific determinations of martial law. They delineated its framework of possibility, determined where it would appear and what would be its linguistic, cognitive and axiological horizon. It lived in the world of martial law as one of the forms of independent communication between people about the meaning of the new situation. At the same time the fact of the martial law was in a sense internalized by this poetry – as a task (semantic, artistic, moral), which it attempted to fulfill. What’s more, it tried to make noticeable its direct connection to the unique conditions of time and place, highlighting them clearly through appropriate language. Not only were the TV presenters given military uniforms on 13<sup>th</sup> of December ... Even the titles of numerous collections of poetry testified – from the other side of the barricade – that the authors felt the need to use military terminology. *Raport z oblężonego miasta* [“Report from a Besieged City”] (Zbigniew

Herbert), *Wojna nerwów* ["The War of Nerves"] (Artur Miedzyrzecki), *Reduta Śląska* ["Silesian Redoubt"] (a collection subtitled *Wiersze wojennej zimy* ["Poems of the Winter of War"]), *Kłęski wojenne* ["Military Defeats"] (Antoni Szymanek, alias Grzegorz Białkowski), *Pierwsza i druga wojna światów* ["The First and Second War of the Worlds"] (Leszek Budrewicz), *Wiersze w trybie doraźnym* ["Poems in Summary Mode"] (Sergeant Pepper) – the list could continue, especially when looking at titles of individual works. The lexical field of "war" extended indeed in many texts metaphorically to provide quite non-military images, such as landscape (*Wkrótce świt wezjdzie / w błyskach bagnietów* [Soon dawn will rise/ in the flashes of bayonets] – Szymanek), physiology (*mój brzuchu / od pewnego czasu / grasz tylko wojskowe marsze* [my stomach/ for some time / you have played only military marches] – Marek Mayer, alias Ryszard Holzer) and writing (*moje dywizje maszerują / równym rzędem / przez tę stronicę* [my divisions march/ in even colum / across this page – Szymanek). Various uses of such vocabulary, whether treated literally or metaphorically, whether serious or ironic, pathetic or mocking – proved that the discourse that employed them wanted to pass for militarized speech, for language called to arms and ready to fulfill his duties on the battlefield.

10<sup>th</sup> August 1985

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After the shock of the night of the 12<sup>th</sup> December 1981, but even before the start of circulation of the first underground newspapers and newsletters, which would contain information about what happened and first attempts at commentary, we started receiving, along with leaflets and proclamations printed in striking factories, verse records of the experience of martial law everywhere. I say everywhere, because it seemed as if those sheets of paper carrying poetic speech, were conveyed to us from all corners of the country at once. How many had to provide relevant texts, copy them, spread, distribute or scatter! The form of these papers resembled the most archaic creations of underground printing. Plain typescript was the common – the prototype of all underground self-publishing – typed mostly on light green tissue paper. The light green color is irrevocably fused in my memory with verses of martial law. When we received an unfortunate later copy of the typescript, the text was often almost completely illegible. Then upon the typescript a zealous and pedantic reader would by hand put the missing letters, the most likely words and even whole lines.

As the underground publishing movement became more organized in publishing and editorial teams, the mass of poetic texts relating to the realities of martial war gradually increased, to reach its peak in the late spring and summer of 1982. This growth remained more or less stable throughout the whole of the next year. Green tissue paper gradually disappeared from circulation, replaced by poems published in newsletters and magazines. Among the periodicals created in the first half of 1982 the unique contribution to the work of collecting poetic texts on martial law belongs to Warsaw's "Wezwanie" (The Call) which from its first issue had been publishing

large sections of contemporary poetic art. What is more, it was “The Call” which offered has the earliest, but at the same time surprisingly sober and accurate, critical readings of such productions. Since mid-1982 more and more individual collections and anthologies had been appearing, including the most comprehensive *Antologia wierszy wojennych* [Anthology of War Poems] published by NOWa, and soon after *Noc generałów. Zbiór poezji wojennej* [The Night of Generals. A Collection of War Poetry] by Wojenna Oficyna, containing only anonymous works. Józef Gajewski’s bibliography, published last year, recorded more than thirty large and small anthologies of this sort published in the two-year period 1982-1983 in different regions of the country. So far, I managed to get to fourteen of them, and yet it is much more than can be found in the library of the Institute of Literary Studies, which after all houses a large body of uncensored publications. As far as is known to me, it seems that such collections repeated largely the same texts (a sort of nationwide canon), while more local works, written by local authors and addressed to local audiences remained in the minority.

Who spoke to us in these transmissions sent illegally on tissue paper, in copied newsletters, magazines, pamphlets, and books?

Seen from this point of view, these works can be divided into three categories.

The first includes works by authors who signed them with their own names, more or less known based of their prior, and legal, literary output. Often these were the texts of authors who remained in confinement, were interned or in imprisoned and who, unlike those acting outside detention, had no reason for literary conspiracy.

The second category consists of works by authors hiding behind aliases and pseudonyms. Some of them used pseudonyms only in this uncensored sphere of their writing, while publishing other works legally and under their own names.

The third category includes texts which circulated anonymously, whose identity and integrity was not protected by any writing subject, whatever its name. The sender of those was – as Stanisław Barańczak insists – the People’s Anonymous. Named thus, the phenomenon appears to be a sort of sociopsychological-literary construct; in reality, however, behind this “folk” quality of anonymous poems one could usually find professional writers with recognizable names. The lack of authorial credit was in the case of most works compensated by their reliance on texts already known to the audience. There appeared a remarkable number of messages of “secondary” character: paraphrases, travesties, or parodies, referring to the most popular works, and as such easily recognizable to the public. In some cases they were subject to only minor modifications or adaptations so that they could fit in thematically to the circumstances of martial law. The range of original texts thus appropriated and utilized on secondary level of literary communication was wide and varied; it mainly included carols, hobo ballads, soldier songs, cabaret pieces, prayers (especially litanies), poems from school reading lists (such as *Do Matki Polki* [To the Polish Mother] and *Rota* [The Oath] ). Some of the more visible texts were contrafacta, new lyrics written for well-known church hymns, folk songs, or even disco hits.

This increased intertextuality in anonymous texts, did not, by any means, secure their integrity. The fact that they were openly parasitic in nature only encouraged their offhand treatment. In the course of circulation they underwent various deformations, divisions, interpolations, and contaminations. As a result different sources frequently offer different local or regional variations of the same texts. Such multiplicity led to blurring of the limits of texts, with none that would pass as the original. The texts' existence involved minor or major modification, as required by circumstances of performance, needs or tastes, similarly to works found in folk circulation. The interesting aspect of this phenomenon of folklorization was, however, the fact that is occasionally involved works belonging to the other two categories. Sometimes the text originally published as anonymous appeared later under a pseudonym, and then again under its creator's actual name, gradually bridging the gap separating it from its author. I remember Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz's sheer amazement at an IBL conference devoted to contemporary poetry (Warsaw 1984), when one of the speakers, a native of Lublin, provided a striking example of anonymous folk art: Rymkiewicz's own poem, whose authorship he never denied! The opposite also happened, situations when an anonymous text circulated under the name of a famous writer. This happened, twice I think, to Czesław Miłosz, causing his irritated protests.

Any methodical analysis should include an extensive field of texts which, while themselves do not fall under the label of "martial law poetry" as they did not arise at that specific time, were probably the most important component of the soil in which it grew. I refer here to numerous collections of earlier works, songs and song-like, since the time of the Bar Confederation until the sixteen months-long carnival of "Solidarity," which appeared during the period of martial law (though in later years as well), creating one of the most visible segments of second circulation. Most popular among them were the collections of patriotic or insurrectionist songs, religious hymns, songs of the Polish Legions and from the Bolshevik War, songs from the Second World War and the time of occupation. Just as important were songs associated with the tradition of "Solidarity" (especially works of Jacek Kaczmarski and in a different way those of Jan Krzysztof Kelus). This field of texts includes reprints of the old hymn books, but also new compilations based on them, both standard sets of well-known works, as well as specialized and themed anthologies, e.g. *Polskie koledy patriotyczne 1831-1983* [Polish patriotic carols 1831-1983] or *Piosennik Powstania Styczniowego* [Songbook of the January Uprising]. In numerous collections old songs could be found next to current (both anonymous and signed) works written during the martial law. Such is the nature of, for example, *Piosenki internowanych* [Songs of the interned]. There are a few such collections, and each appeared in several editions, but all had the same title, an ambiguous one at that, since it meant both the songs created by interned authors, and all the songs which were simply sung collectively in detention centers. A similar mixture of old and new songs can be found in collections associated with some permanent locations, usually places important to the community where these songs were sung. An example of this

is the collection, however incomplete, of songs sung at the flower cross in Warsaw, which was published in several editions by the underground publishers of Huta Warszawa. These mixtures of old and new material provide very good insight into the local repertoires and more than other types of publications can be a significant source of ethnographic data on the culture of the martial law period.

In general the field of texts discussed above should not be treated as a background for what is important in the poetic output of the time of martial law, but it must be seen as an active element in the creation of poetic speech. It offered a *supply of ideas*, utilized by the authors of the poetry of the time, a reservoir of images, symbols, comparisons, formulas, and clichés, from which they drew both creative stimuli and means of expression, a dictionary providing the necessary tricks and patterns of speech. On the other hand, the collection of texts drawn from tradition and placed in the context of current social experience, created for the readers a frame of reference, allowing them to expect something new from writing initiatives, shaping their ideas about the character of speech that could *today* poetically describe a national disaster, express the feelings of collective despair, and rekindle hope and the will to resist.

15<sup>th</sup> September 1989



The poetry of martial law left no room for complications or ideological dilemmas. In all its versions, it shared a common point of view: it consistently remained the speech of the abused, the intimidated, the persecuted, and the humiliated: the voice of those targeted by the war machinery. *Ex post*, this unified perspective seems to us quite natural, though, theoretically, its monopoly was not a foregone conclusion. After all, the introduction of martial law involved multitudes of people, not only policymakers, executors, activists, and officials, but also the apologists, heralds, hacks and silent supporters, realists, pragmatists, the ideologues of the lesser evil, and possibly countless more! And yet, curiously, or strangely even, the state of mind of all these people, their convictions, hopes, rationalizations, and even scruples have not found any poetic expression.

Of course, they were verbalized in areas of public speech other than poetry. Thus poetry which recorded the point of view of victims and rebels placed itself in opposition not to another poetic discourse, which would express different point of view (as it didn't exist), but to the non-poetic discourse used by the power structure and its political collaborators. Newspaper disinformation, propaganda, the deceitful rhetoric of TV news, evasive arguments and excuses by egghead supporters, martial orders and notices, sentences by military tribunals – all of those marked the martial law poetry's negative linguistic horizon. It assumed the role of counter-language, opposed to modes of speech in the service of violence. Hence the multiple references to this negative context; the adoption of words originating in the discourse of violence in order to immediately unmask the lie it conceals; the use of the propaganda formula in order to be able to boil it down to what it was in reality – a hypocritical



cliché; recalling the arguments of newspapers in order to promptly expose their absurd, deceitful, and meaningless nature. This kind of relationship cannot be identified with any form of dialogue. To quote the hated words was to refuse them, to depreciate and expose to ridicule or contempt. This double gesture of invocation and rejection, or, to mimic Białoszewski, of rejection through invocation, was often what prompted the very act of speaking, maintained it and to managed the growth of semantic expression.

In the anonymous (pseudo)folk poetry we observe at every step the references to the formal patterns of the official language of policy, quoted in the characteristic seemingly dependent speech of a street singer or a beggar from the church steps:

Partia, wiodąca siła narodu  
Ona ocali kraj nasz od głodu.  
Rurarz, Spasowski za oceanem  
Podstępnie knują razem z Reganem  
Brac̃ robotnicza już im nie sprzyja...

*(Santa Milicyja)*

The Party, the leading force of the nation  
Will save our country from starvation.  
Spasowski and Rurarz are overseas  
with Reagan hatching treacherous plot  
Brotherhood of workers supports them not.

*(Santa Milicyja)*

...nam groziła wojna domowa  
I wszystko przez Solidarność  
Bo ona ponoć miała liworwer  
I chciała władzę zagarnąć

*(Grudzień)*

we were threatened by civil war  
And all because of Solidarity  
it apparently had a leverover  
and wanted to take over

*(December)*

By położyć kres anarchii i kontrrewolucji,  
Warcholskim rozruchom, partyjnej destrukcji,  
By zalety socjalizmu poznał naród ciemny  
Wprowadził Pan Premier w Polsce stan wojenny  
*(Anarchia)*

To put an end to anarchy and counter-revolution,  
the rioting of thugs, and party's dissolution,  
So that values of socialism would enlighten Poles  
The Prime Minister today declared martial law

*(Anarchy)*

## Czesław Miłosz and the Polish School of Poetry

Sometimes the text develops through the collision of two units of meaning: one corresponding to the quoted speech, the other expressing the subject's own words. The latter in a sense invalidates the former by means of an unexpected clarification or simply lethal negation. We learn that the "leading force," by declaring martial law:

Wnet odzyskała swą wiarygodność  
*Tak jak eunuch odzyskał płodność.*

Na lepsze wszystko się odmieni  
*Różowa przyszłość nam się czerwieni.*

Ekonomika tak się poprawi  
*Że nam bez bólu odpadnie narwis.*

*(Wojenny walczyk)*

Soon regained its credibility  
*As the eunuch who regained fertility.*

Everything will change for the better  
*As rosy future gets redder and redder.*

Our economy is certain to improve the most  
*And we'll find our monetary overhang lost.*

*(The Martial Waltz)*

And so on and so forth. We can observe here a kind of stichomythic pattern: the first line semantically collides with the second, which is symmetrical and related by rhyme. The result is that of two voices alternating as in a comedic dialogue.

Such a mechanism of signification, however simple or even primitive, was used not exclusively in the poems belonging to folklore, or imitating the works of folklore. It was equally employed in "literary" poetry, the political lyric, especially from the beginning of martial law. We find its workings in Ryszard Krynicki's epigrams (from the volume *Jeżeli w jakimś kraju* [If in a country]) full of noble pathos, in which this double gesture of invocation/rejection appears as a fundamental principle for the development of speech:

Na jaki naród  
śmie się jeszcze powoływać  
samozwańcza władza,  
która na obcy rozkaz wypowiedziała wojnę narodowi?  
Jaki naród miałaby ocalać?  
To naród szuka przed nią ocalenia

*(Na jaki naród?)*

What nation  
do they dare invoke,  
the self-appointed authorities  
that acting on a foreign order declared war on the nation?  
What nation would they save?  
This nation is looking to be saved from them.]

*(What nation?)*

– Ratujemy ojczyznę –  
mówią dyktator i zdrajca,  
gotowi nadal okupować kraj,  
więzić niewinnych

...  
(*Ratujemy ojczyznę*)

– We’re saving the homeland –  
say the dictator and the traitor,  
willing to continue to occupy the country,  
imprison the innocent

...  
(*We’re saving the homeland*)

Kłamią:  
– Nie chcemy krwi –  
a rozkazują,  
żeby bić i zabijać.

Krzyczą:  
– Historia nas osądzi –  
kiedy zbrodnie już ich osądziły.

(*Drżą ze strachu*)

They lie:  
– We do not want blood –  
and they order,  
to fight and kill.

They shout:  
– History will judge us –  
when they have been judged already by their crimes.

(*They tremble with fear*)

All oppositions here are clearly visible. There is the speech of those who spread false platitudes (about saving the country or saving the nation – or vice versa) aimed to obscure what they actually do as dictators, traitors, torturers and murderers, and opposite there is the speech of those who expose their actions. It’s them – and us. There’s no complexity or ambiguity of dialogue, because in this relationship any possibility of dialogue has been eliminated. There are two types of speech – incompatible and mutually untranslatable. And there are two types of speakers, between whom exists a yawning and impassable chasm. *They* cannot be considered partners in communication, for they have become our occupants. Jerzy Malewski (Włodzimierz Bolecki) aptly called the writings of martial law “a poetry without illusions.” Indeed, it seems it finally broke away from all utopian negotiations, so much alive in the period of sixteen months of “Solidarity,” said goodbye to the naive hopes for an effective agreement and settlement and to the belief in the possibility of developing the language capable of mediating between the discourse of the communist regime

and the language of social aspirations, of assuming the role of a shock absorber in their inevitable collisions. Martial law put an end to these hopes, precisely because it exposed, hidden beneath the camouflage and disguise of everyday existence, the true nature of the political system in defense of which it was declared, namely the *occupational nature of communism*.

This diagnosis led to an immediate disambiguation of the ideological situation: those who realized that they lived in the occupied country could not avoid extending that awareness onto the past stages of their existence in that country. They had to look again at the past through the lens of their current experience. The reality in which they lived now turned out to be just another form of experience that they had known for a long time, but did not know how to properly categorize. This in turn meant that the opposition to martial law was in fact an opposition to communism as such: it was its clear and decisive rejection.

In this state of mind grew the kind of poetry we are discussing here. Of course, its definitive “no” was first and foremost a response to the circumstances of the time: tanks in the streets, mass arrests, raids, internments, fatalities during police and military action – this was a reality that demanded opposition in the first place. Bitterness and anger were initially aimed at symbols and figures directly related to 13<sup>th</sup> December. But the verse attacks against WRON or Jaruzelski (Jaruzel), himself probably the most insulted figure on the Polish political scene since the anti-Targowica literature, against the traitors in generals’ uniforms, very quickly expanded beyond this limited frontline, and embraced the whole of PRL experience. Indeed, the poetry of martial law, and I mean mostly its folk and pseudo-folk sections, became a huge record of anti-communist curses, complaints and grievances, expressed simply and bluntly, without any indirect or metaphorical devices; a register in which higher ideas, of national and democratic aspirations, were intertwined with mundane troubles of the poor and neglected everyday existence. These complaints and acts of condemnation, the ridicule and the insults were much older than the martial law, older than the “Solidarity”; some referred to the years immediately after the World War II and the time of Stalin, others to the time of Gomułka or Gierek. But so far they existed in isolation, in everyday speech of different social strata, in political jokes, sayings, nicknames, rhymes or wordplays. They were only consolidated and in a sense systematized through the anonymous works of post-December years. It was a kind of totaled bill, presented to the rejected system.

8<sup>th</sup> October 1987

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Martial law presented poetry, the literary, rather than the folk kind, with a truly difficult task. Made lazy by its long time existence on the reservation provided by PRL, it now had to leave its refuge and desperately seek an appropriate language that could be used specifically to construct a poetic analysis of the changes in collective consciousness after the shock of December 13th.

In order to treat this issue from a researcher's perspective, one should first attempt to create a kind of sociographic description of various versions of this analysis, taking into account their location – a place occupied by the author in the community of martial law, which defined the specific perspective of viewing the phenomena. Poetic speech recorded several of the most common “locations”:

- the point of view of the “underground people,” the conspirators;
- the point of view of the internees and prisoners;
- the point of view of university intellectuals;
- the point of view of the frightened and confused “population”;
- the point of view of an exile who receives bleak news from the country.

Considering these perspectives, we can observe the recurring coexistence of two writing strategies, methods of coping with the troublesome task of describing a new and thus unnamed situation, which poses a challenge to the existing “state of word” (to use Jozef Wittlin's term) in poetry. Speaking about the coexistence of two strategies, I mean the fact that both can appear in the works by the same author, and even more – they can work together in a single text. However, they remain directed towards two contrastingly different models of poetry.

The first one I refer to as second-hand imaging. At its core lies the conviction that what the society painfully experienced in the months of martial law, only appears to be a new phenomenon. In fact, it is simply a variant of the eternal Polish destiny – inevitably returning in the biographies of successive generations.

I znowu – długie nocne rodaków rozmowy

Czas tego kraju kołem się zatacza

Z powstania w wojnę na nowe powstanie

Krótki czas wolny – i podziemna praca

I długie trwanie policyjnych nocy

And again, the long night talks of my countrymen

This country's time returning in a circle

From uprising through war into new uprising

Short time off – and more underground work

And the long duration of curfew nights]

Thus in the poem *Do Matki Polki* [To the Polish Mother] Mat (Jarosław Markiewicz) writes about this idea of recurrence and return. The thought of the fundamental identity of destinies, duties, and defeats of successive Polish generations, naturally leads to another thought: namely, that there is no need for poetry to work hard on inventing a new language to give an account of our present destiny, duty, and defeat, as the images generated by earlier, especially romantic poetry, remain perfectly adequate. Stanisław Barańczak correctly emphasized the role that chorus plays in many poems of the martial law, a formula that states that something is here *again*: “I znowu – długie nocne rodaków rozmowy” [And again, the long night talks of my

countrymen], “Znów zdławiony świt wolności” [Again is smothered the dawn of freedom], “Znowu łamiemy się czarnym opłatkiem polskiego losu” [Once again we break the black wafer of Polish fate].

All those instances of “again” are followed by appropriate categorizations of what it is that repeats itself. The consciousness of the occupational nature of communism, liberated by the martial law, automatically found the means of expression in the system of references and images of the occupation of World War II (interestingly German, rather than Soviet) superimposed on the current experience. What was perceived and lived began, somehow spontaneously, to fall into a familiar pattern: conspiracy against the occupants, police harassment, raids, the underground state, diversion, sabotage, and camps. This way of reading the present was probably closest to popular imagination. After all, already in 1968 the students shouted “Gestapo” at the police units scattering the street demonstrations. It was not a coincidence either that the musical jingle of the underground “Solidarity” radio was “Siekiera, motyka...” [Axe, hoe...], one of the “forbidden songs” during the German occupation.

However, poetry did not stop on this first – popular – level of identification. It searched for necessary means deeper in history, drawing on the grim narratives of the nineteenth-century. The era of Paskiewicz and the tragedy of the January Uprising provided the most appropriate, as it would seem, models for the expression of current experience.

Kiedy się obudziłem, Polski już nie było,  
Na skwerze przed Teatrem, jak za Paskiewicza,

Małe włochate konie kozackich szwadronów  
Szczypały suchą trawę, krzyczeli setnicy  
I słyhać było śpiew w nieznanej mowie...

When I woke up, there was no Poland,  
On the square in front of the Theatre, as in the time of Paskiewicz,

Small furry horses of Cossack squadrons  
Nibbling at dry grass, the screaming centurions

And I could hear singing in unfamiliar speech

Later in this poem by Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz the image of conquered Warsaw is developed into the image of post-uprising exodus of Warsaw's inhabitants in the autumn of 1944:

I jak przed wielu laty, Lwowską, Nowowiejską  
Wychodziliśmy z miasta długimi kolumnami  
Pchając dziecinne wózki, dźwigając walizki...

And like many years ago, along Lwowska, Nowowiejska  
We left the city in long columns

Pushing baby carriages, carrying suitcases

Another poet, Krzysztof Karasek, who published his poems as Anonymous, says that before our eyes:

Znów ożywają stare obrazy Grottgera:  
 “Branka,” “Żałobne wieści,” “Lud w kościele,” “Pierwsza ofiara”

...

Jak w 63, u Grottgera  
 znowu pukają do polskich drzwi,  
 pukają nocą, wyłamują z futryn,  
 gdy nie otworzysz na czas im.

Grottger’s old paintings come to life again:  
 “Captive,” “Gravely news,” “The people in the church,” “First victim”  
 ...

As in ‘63, in Grottger  
 again they are knocking on the Polish door,  
 knocking at night, breaking them down,  
 should you not open them in time.

Next comes the image of those detained, carried across the city “chained and terrified.” Of course they are carried in kibitka wagons and are:

jak ci z celi Konrada, jak ci spod Belwederu,  
 jak ze styczniowej branki,  
 z grudniowego poboru.

...

znów powtarzają te same gesty, słowa  
 modlitwy lub przekleństw

like those from Konrad’s cell or those from Belweder,  
 from January raids,  
 or December conscription.

...

again, repeating the same gestures, words  
 prayers or curses

In such poems we encounter the world immediately *doubled*. What is present and available for observation had no time to appear in its factuality, because from the very beginning it was imbued with the sense of something historical. That historical meaning came forward, and thus obscured, the image of the present, which as a result took on a half-unreal, spectral character, deprived of its own weight and appearing only as a repetition or copy.

But the historiosophical vision, in which the primary sense of the events of winter 1981/82 amounts to their repetitive character did not satisfy the ambitions of a number of poets who sought to expose even more superior sense – the meaning of repetition itself. And thus was revived an allegorical vision of inevitable martyrdom, of Poland permanently crucified, sentenced to Golgotha.

## Czesław Miłosz and the Polish School of Poetry

Przebita włócznią grudnia  
pęka tętnica tej ziemi  
wybucha  
upływem wisły z wisły  
płaczem zranionych wód

Pierced by a spear of December  
bursts the artery of the land  
explodes  
in the flow of vistula from vistula  
in the cry of wounded waters]

This image comes from the poem *Przepowiednie* [Prophecies] published under the pen name of Maciej Komięga (Jerzy Ficowski). In Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz's poem this romantic allegory is becomes more straightforward:

To ciało gwoździe w dłoniach ma,  
Nad ciałem krąży czarna wrona.  
Jak całun jest grudniowa mgła.  
O patrz! Ojczyzna twoja kona.

(13 grudnia)

This body has nails through its hands,  
Above it circles the black crow.  
December fog is like a shroud.  
Look now! Your homeland is dying.

(December 13th)

In general it can be said that poetry discussed here has *historiosophically dreamed through actual history*. Besides, the theme of sleep and dreaming is a noticeably common occurrence (I have not yet mentioned Ernest Bryll: *Śniłem, że Papież w komży tak skrwawionej / aż narodową barwę miała...* [I dreamed of the Pope in surplice so bloodied / until it had the national color...]), creating a kind of framework for all these analogies, parables and allegories. The culmination of historiosophical dreaming was sometimes, especially in the case of second-rate poets, a martyrological kitsch or a chromolithograph of patriotic zeal.

The second writing strategy, in opposition to second-hand imaging I intend to call *poetic documentalism*. At its core was a desire to record the “momentary truth,” and not the essential or model truth of the time; a desire to capture and instantly preserve what has commonly been called the concrete event, situation and experience; a tendency to ground the speech in “here and now” – both through a thematization of the present, as well as by means of indication, by becoming its mark. Such poetry was eager to document the “everyday” of Jaruzelski’s war, the state of mind of people bearing the burdens of martial law, the peculiar atmosphere of different places and centers of social activity, and the ways of verbalizing experiences in different environment. It never strived for a general definition, but was rather satisfied with observations that were aspect-oriented, local, fragmented. It saw the order of the observational data as a basic level of expression, which validates other levels of meaning.



Poetry which aims to achieve such goals must, before it can say anything about the world it wants to document, overcome or remove the obstacles which separate it from its object. These are, first of all, and in the present case, the time-honored (and thus immediately obvious) patterns of poetic speech about national calamities, loss and injustice, a true maze of intricate symbolism and stylistic principles, in which even renowned artists occasionally got lost. Getting through the maze to reach its own world, one waiting on the adequate definition, has become possible because this poetry greatly reduced those aspects of the “poetic” which would naturally push it toward worn patterns. It rejected the rhetorical pathos and the accumulation of meanings. It chose instead the colloquial, prose-like message and literal description. It is interesting that the chance to embrace the linguistic perspective unconstrained by obligations to the stereotype was offered by a turn to the poetics thought by many to be already used up, namely to the poetics of Różewicz. Both indicated moments, that is the colloquialization of speech and the respect for the literal name as the ground of poetic activity, clearly to refer to it.

In some of its manifestations poetic documentalism was tantamount to feeding the tradition of commemorative poetry dedicated to record important or unusual events in the life of a specific community or group (e.g. *Na przełamanie czołgiem bramy Pafawagu* [“On the Tanks Breaking Down the Gate of Pafawag”] or *Żołnierze przerwali strajk, wkraczając do Biblioteki Narodowej* [“Soldiers Broke the Strike by Entering the National Library”] both by Leszek Budrewicz from the collection *Pierwsza i druga wojna światów* [“The First and Second War of the Worlds”]). At other times, documentalism expressed itself through the unusual thoroughness of descriptions, almost dysfunctional in its excess and thus giving birth, as Barthes would have it, to the realistic effect.

Jeden prokurator (łysy, mówi cicho  
i niewyraźnie), trzech sędziów (ten  
z prawej strony zakłada dla zabawy  
okulary należące do tego, który siedzi  
pośrodku), trzech brodatych oskarżonych  
(wymieniają uśmiechy z publicznością),  
trzech obrońców (siwe włosy, notatki,  
togi obszyte wątlm paskiem zieleni),  
...

Za oknem

gawron czyści swoją odwieczną togę.

Protokolantka ziewa

One prosecutor (bald and mutters  
indistinctly), three judges (the one on  
the right puts on glasses belonging to the one  
in the middle, for fun), three bearded defendants  
(exchanging smiles with the audience)  
three defenders (gray hair, notes,  
gowns trimmed with faint green stripe)  
...

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Outside the window

A rook is cleaning his eternal gown.

The recording clerk yawns

Quoted above is Adam Zagajewski's *Sąd* [The Court], published in 1982 under the pseudonym of Sumero. At other times still, the poetic documentalism manifested itself through a kind of "quotes" from reality – seemingly directs records of what was heard, what came from the outside. As in Wiktor Woroszyński's six-liner which transferred into poetic speech a dialogue between ZOM

O officers:

zdałeś ten łom

no zdałem  
ja nie zdałem  
trzeba było zdać  
co będę zdawał i brał  
zdawał i brał

you returned the crowbar

I did  
I did not  
you should have  
why would I return it and take it again  
return it and take it again

In the writings of martial law there is a whole family of related works particularly representative of this type of writing. By that I mean the collections and series of texts produced in the internment camps and prisons. In other words, sets of works whose distinguishing feature is that the situation of speech is clearly defined at least in this one dimension: they are broadcast from *there*: from Białoleka, Jaworz, Darłówko, Gołdap, Strzelce Opolskie, Nowy Wiśnicz, Załęże, and so on. One could mention collections such as the two *Dzienniki internowania* [Diaries of internment] by Woroszyński, *Biała łąka* [White meadow] by Tomasz Jastrun, *Ogień* [Fire] by Jan Polkowski, *Zmierzch i gypsy* [Twilight and kites] by Antoni Pawlak, *Racja stanu* [Reason of state] by Anka Kowalska, *Polska więzienna* [Poland imprisoned] by Lothar Herbst, czy *Listy do brata* [Letters to my brother] by Grzegorz Musiał.

It is indeed significant that the sobriety and relevance of observations, a certain realistic quality of speech, a preference for facts, an emotional restraint, brevity and simplicity of expression were all encouraged by the specific location of the subject. In the Polish literary tradition, the prison cell is rather associated with visionary flights of fancy.

The documentary character of poetic texts was equally determined by their genres. The authors referred to them as diaries, prison kites, letters: in other words, forms used for communicating information, notifying or reporting. For the most part, these texts indicated their own incompleteness or indefiniteness, sketches of possible poems, early drafts, poems with no punch lines, punch lines without poems, ideas for future use, fragments of greater wholes, instances of speech cut in mid-sentence, barely begun narratives. In terms of genre they could all be catego-

rized as “zanoty” [notedowns], to borrow the name from Białoszewski. These are records which are left in the shape that allows the reader to assume they are still close to the objective or psychological situation they have grown out of, and have not yet moved away from it to a distance determined by conventional form. What is more, they would be generally held in such proximity by their date of creation. It was not a secondary or incidental matter for their semantics and pragmatics. By putting the date under the text, the author wished for it to be recognized as related to the content. The text thus became like a ship anchored in the harbor; its creator preventing it from sail on the waters of unauthorized reading. It was to be forever fixed to the days and months of martial law period.

In order to avoid confusion let me make it clear that I do not maintain that the strategy I have called here poetic documentalism transformed poetry into the work of fact or journalistic reporting. It operated within the poetry which was at the same time personal, civic, religious, moralistic, or even (albeit rarely), metaphysical in its lyricism. But the point is that all of its varieties were based on a common ground, formed by new realities, landscapes, places, situations, events, human reactions; all of them experienced, validated by observation, clearly identified and named in a literal way. They constituted a foundation beyond all doubt for this poetry, a kind of basic dictionary from which it could proceed in many different directions. The presence of this dictionary in poetic speech, the way it shone through the moralistic, civic, philosophical or personal content, as well as its role as a factor in initiating the movement of meaning in the text – this is my understanding of poetic documentalism.

7<sup>th</sup> November 1986

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It is in fact quite a bizarre episode in the history of twentieth-century Polish poetry. It appeared busy and energetic, having produced a lot of works, and yet proved to be barren. It did not introduce anything new to the development of the art of poetry; it was not a beginning of any evolutionary sequences, nor did it create a school, a trend or its own recognizable style; it remained a kind of addendum to the various previous conventions, some of them already used up. More importantly, the readability of martial law poems is entirely limited to the conditions of the time of their creation. This is not a poetry simply “to be read” outside its original and primary function. This is where (and when) it was buried forever. I do not deny, however, that is a very interesting subject of investigation for literary history as a rich and complex textual reality. And besides, it can serve as a revealing source material for the study of the changes in the collective consciousness which take place in the process of transition from communism to a time as yet without a fixed name; let us assume, therefore, that it is “post-communism.”

29<sup>th</sup> November 1989

## Jerzy KANDZIORA

### “That which is slipping away”: On Exposing the Idiom in Stanisław Barańczak’s “Surgical Precision”

Stanisław Barańczak’s readers are accustomed to the fact that each new collection of his poems surprises with poetic variety and introduction of previously unknown registers. Without going back into too distant past, we recall that *Atlantis* (1986) brought a series of image-poems with distinct frames and highly saturated with color, presenting a specific hyperrealistic record of time, freed from axiology and polemics with the language. *A Postcard from the Other World* (1988) continued this new epic style of poetic narration, but here, even more clearly than in individual poems from *Atlantis*, the poet delved beneath the surface of the phenomena, searching in *this* world for the secret codes and rhythms of *that* hypothetical world. This he did more intensely the more transitory and indelibly sensual seemed reality and everyday life.

                    miałem potępieńczą pracę  
rozbijając to wszystko  
                    I had a wretched job  
dismantling it all\*

says the narrator in the poem *Pan Elliot Tischler* [“Mr. Elliot Tischler”], which is an attempt to break through the tangible matter (bits of other people’s privacy in the newly purchased home) to the transcendent, to the question about the fate of the owner of the house after his death. Dismantling Mr. Tischler’s wooden structure – a ramp to the garden for his disabled wife – can be seen as a metaphor for seeking different, alternative dimension. The principle of a hidden code governed every poem in *A Postcard from the Other World*, dictating a sophisticated, multi-level organiza-

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\* Unless otherwise note all quoted passages translated by Paweł Pyrka

tion of rhyme and meter, but also the composition of the whole set, in which the metaphor of the hero's single day, and of single human life, is inscribed along with the metaphor of conversation with a hypothetical Creator, identifiable in a mirror arrangement of poems which represent the lack of conclusion in that dialogue.

And finally *Journey in Winter* (1994) – a fascinating poetic dream, unfolding in monochromatic tones of winter. Here Barańczak seems to leave behind that poetic joy of color and image. A bleak, wintry landscape – inspired by the songs of Franz Schubert, and more distantly, motifs from the poems of Wilhelm Müller – provides a scenery free of illusions of domesticity, where a spatial-conceptual philosophical discourse develops, on the place of man in the universe and the absence of necessity for human happiness. A discourse, we should add, which appears to be a modern paraphrase of confessions of a disappointed romantic lover who has been denied the right to happiness and rejected by indifferent world.

Released in 1998, "Surgical Precision" includes a number of poems written in the style known from *Atlantis* and *A Postcard from the Other World*, in which Barańczak's poetic road reaches its fullness. I am thinking here among others of *Altana* ["A Gazebo"] and *Plynąc na Sutton Island* ["Going to Sutton Island"], probably some of the most beautiful Polish poems of the twentieth century. Barańczak's latest volume, however, is also, and perhaps most of all, an opening of new spaces and paths of poetry, the existence of which was, admittedly, difficult to predict, reading his poems from the eighties.

The most remarkable poetic innovation in this volume seems to be the unusual, almost expansive presence of *idiom*. By that I mean both the concept of idiolect in its literal, encyclopedic sense (as a "set of individual properties characterizing speech of an individual, related to their origin, education, profession, environmental habits, stylistic preferences, etc." – Dictionary of Literary Terms, ed. J. Sławiński), and a deep poetic immersion in all other, not exclusively linguistic idioms of the world – the idiom of private biography, of human body, of a section of matter, space, a memorized sound, a melody line. Idiom appears as a design principle, indeed as a center where most of the poems are crystallized, while the essential poetic drama of "Surgical Precision" involves the uncovering of what is hidden in the accident of idiom: the fundamental mysteries of existence, marks of genius, traces of the sacred, finished beauty, superhuman principles and logic of the world, all encoded in the disposable and the mundane, concealed beneath the trivial coating of events. The reader, being a witness to these operations of poetry, may initially stand helpless in the face of individual poems. With an extraordinary passion, Barańczak poetically appropriates the most peculiar, and in a sense the most extraneous areas of reality, fragments of space, objects, texts of culture, individual words extracted from the corners of language. They become an object of affirmation; their one-off quality, their uniqueness and placement outside the order become dramatically enhanced, perhaps refined in the act of poetry.

The poems in "Surgical Precision" which display fascination with idiom are those formed around a single personal word, expression or an artifact of memory;

poems which enter the secret areas of intimate subconsciousness, of linguistic and pictorial prehistory: *Poręcz* ["Handrail"], *Za szkłem* ["Behind Glass"], *Od Knasta* ["From Knast"], *Problem nadawcy* ["The Sender's Problem"]. Each of these works, these poetic revelations, is anchored in a word. A word which carries the entire personal era ("Knast," a name of a confectioner from Poznań in "From Knast," or "fresh pickled cucumbers" remembered from distant youth in "Behind Glass"), which opens the senses to the microcosm of matter and its relationship to human existence, limited by time (the idiolectic "tubajfor" in "Handrail"), which brings to light the seemingly untranslatable idiom of traditional Polish culture (in "The Sender's Problem" which paraphrases Fredro's *The Revenge*). The word, the idiolect, is a medium, a key opening a time, an idea, but, as a carrier of those dimensions, it remains at the same time a separate entity in a poem. The surprise at the universe of the word continues, a single, unique set of sounds and syllables, which could hold, inscribed within, all the great objectivized world. The fascinating arbitrariness of the word "Cześnik," in which someone (?) once (?) inscribed an entire universe, now completely illegible, yet existing behind the veil of time, beyond the obstacle of the sounds-letters code:

nikt już nie wie, co znaczą archaiczny przydomek czy tytuł:  
... zniekształcony derywat słów "cześć"? "czas"? "nieszczęśnik"? "uczestnik"?

nobody knows what this archaic nickname or title means:  
... distorted derivative of the word "hello"? "Time"? "Unfortunate"? "Participant"? ]  
(*The Sender's Problem*)

The word "powiat" (district), which is an episode in the poem *Powiedz, że wkrótce* ["Say, it won't be long"]:

W... no, to słowo, też na wpół martwe... w "powiecie"?  
W powiecie skóry wszyscy znają się nawzajem.

In the ... well, this word also half-dead ... in the "district"?  
In the district of skin they all know each other.

The word "szczwany" (wily) in the poem *Debiutant w procederze* ["Rookie in the Business"], which carries an extinct grammatical category and a whole tradition and cultural idiom is now lost in social memory (although the poet does not ask about this prehistory in the text, something tells him make use of this particular word repeatedly). Finally, there are the deep connotations of the title word "poręcz" in "Handrail," bearing the refrain, "Kto spamięta? I kto się odwdzięczy?"

In all these examples, the poetic amazement comes from singularity and accidentality as faces of the infinity, from the discovery that there is no territory of language, that each idiom is able to contain the universe, and finally that someone? something? inscribes, encodes the universe, the absolute, the perfection, into colloquial words, familiar and "indigenous" expressions, dwelling in the dialects of the language, in sanctuaries and provinces of time, space, culture, and that it does

so, moreover, against the human hierarchy of the "center" and the "periphery" of the world.

The poems "Handrail" and "Behind Glass" present perhaps the most radical attempt to reveal the universe in singularity and uniqueness. They start from idiolect, from a private word, which not only carries its individual meaning, its designation, but what is more, it carries the mark of its single use or production. It is a word that "happened" in a particular situation, which makes it even more accidental, more apart from the rest. And that word becomes an idea, revealing its unpredictable potency; it activates times and spaces.

"Handrail," an extremely mysterious poem, is "happening" somewhere on the borderlines of language, inorganic matter of wooden railing and someone's human life, which is heading into collapse, into non-existence. Two words – "poręcz" (rail) and "tubajfor" (polonized "two by four" – dimensions of timber used to build the railing) – radiate in the poem from their material, wooden core. They become carriers of the pre-idea of – there is no other way to express it – woodenness, combining in that incantation of "tubajfor" with the pre-idea of carpentry as a wisdom of shaping matter, in which human existence can find support:

Milklwie oschła dobroć kanciastej poręczy  
z – jakby spolszczył imigrant-cieśla – tubajfora  
(two-by-four): kto spamięta? I kto się odwdzięczy

za jej sosnowe wsparcie, za rytm, w jakim jęczy  
w porze przyplywu zawias pomostu, raz po raz,  
żeliwnie? Postna szczodrość.

Taciturn dry kindness of angular railing  
made from (by immigrant-carpenter) – a "tubajfor"  
(two-by-four) who will remember? And who will repay it?

for its pine support for the rhythm in which  
at high tide the hinge moans on the pier, again and again,  
like cast-iron? Fasting generosity.

Once heard, the idiom "tubajfor" is repeatedly echoed, transformed, but still reminiscent of the original on the level of sound and rhythm. It is inserted into a sophisticated rhyming pattern of the *villanelle*, which also provides framework for the whole poem: : "two-by-four ... Tu? Błąd. Wróć. ... Stój. Bądź. Trwaj. ... To? Byt. Twój" [two-by-four ... Here? Error. Back. ... Stop. Be. Exist. ... This? Your. Life"]. This series of warnings, pleas and judgments seems to be, hidden in the idiom, a voice of a Guide? A Person who Knows the Way? A Guardian? It is one of many mysteries of this poem. The word "poręcz" (rail) undergoes multiple alliterations but returns with its core unchanged thirteen times in rhyming position, in accordance with rules of *villanelle*. It seems entwine the poem, to wrap around the ends of lines, protecting the text from dissolution, holding together that which is impermanent. It seems to reenact in its verse-making role the idea of caring matter, repeatedly expressed

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in the poem, most clearly in the chorus of “And who will repay it?” The existence of inanimate matter is in the “Handrail” opposed to the vision of dissolution, the end of human life, in the evocative image of human fear of passing:

... Kto pamięta? podnosi wzrok, wdzięczny,

znad niewywoływalnych negatywów tęczy:  
zimnych głębin? A “zimnych” to nie metafora:  
igliwia skostnień mrowią w nas, nas tępo dręczy

próchno, któremu trzeba okuć, plomb, pajęczyn  
filtrujących owadzi mrok, podpór i porad:

*Stój. Bądź. Trwaj. ...*

... Who remembers? looks up, grateful,

from undevelopable negatives of rainbow:  
cold depths? And “cold” is not a metaphor:  
needles of stiffness tingling inside us, torments us dull

rot, which needs bindings, seals, spider webs  
to filter the insect darkness, support and advice:

*Stop. Be. Exist. ...*

The idiom of the “rail” is a response to these fears. A reaction to the vision of an inverted rainbow, of “cold depths,” “stiffness” and “rot,” which can be associated with luminescent layers of a cemetery, of underground space, unreachable by human voice (the ambiguity of the phrase “undevelopable negatives of rainbow”). The proximity of the world of things, of inorganic material, more durable than the human body is seen as a stabilizing context for human life saturated with the fear of passing and end:

Postna szczodrość, najciaśniej podręczny

pień nauk zheblowany w przyziemny, bezdźwięczny  
głos, w linię prostą, prostą jak próg czy zaporą:

*Tu? Błąd. Wróć.*

Fasting generosity, the tightest handy

trunk of sciences planed into mundane soundless  
voice, into straight line, straight as threshold or barrier:

*Here? Error. Back.*

The relationship between man and things of inanimate matter is an area of, so to speak, heightened sensitivity in the poetry of Stanisław Barańczak. In another poem from the collection, *Plakała w nocy, ale nie jej płacz go zbudził* [“She cried in the night, but it wasn’t what woke him”], there is the “creak of wood, rattling against



the chimney/ branch, wind, trembling glass," which are said to be "alien to affairs of people" – more in the sense of a soothing recognition that there is an autonomous sphere of inanimate entities which makes us, humans, realize that the logic of this world is not directed at mankind. This theme emerged clearly already in Barańczak's *Journey in Winter*. This "impartiality," ontological separateness and individuality of inanimate matter would be, if I read *She cried in the night, but it wasn't what woke him*, a source of tranquility. In "Handrail" the substantiality, the texture of wood, its grain, which we touch and deeply experience, give a chance to delay the existential drama, the pain of passing. The longevity, the actual materiality of the railing confirms (poręcza), the continuity of the world, in light of which one's own death is less painful.

Another line of associations and an area of experience are opened by the idiom "fresh pickled cucumbers" in the poem "Behind Glass." The poem has features of poetic epiphany. The starting point is the image: kitchen, noon, cucumbers in a jar, a moment in time, in space – perhaps in distant past. Similarly, at the end of the text the poetic narrative is released from the "solution" of idiolect, in which it was previously stuck and which at the end radiates a different picture, a streak of memory released from the element of language, a scene in a movie theater:

ten wrodzony wasz opór i upór  
jak dwie bruzdy na twarzy – takiej, jaką miał Gary Cooper  
w słynnym kadrze, też za szkłem zresztą, za strzaskaną w promienne drzazgi  
szybą. Twarz z brodawkami i wszystkim, strużką potu, fałdami skóry;  
ale tak jasno wtedy, że trzydzieści lat temu, w salce  
kina "Muza," na ścianach, na ich tynku i boazerii  
jej ekranowy odbłask wypisywał: wolno-ć, niewierny  
Tomku, w samo południe, czyli w każdej chwili, wolno ci sprawdzić  
tę mgiełkę na szkle słoja, krwotok tej szyby, puls gwiazdy,  
sprawdzać życie, własne, na przegubach świata kładąc półślepe palce.

this innate resistance of yours and stubbornness  
like two lines in the face – like that of Gary Cooper's  
in the famous shot, also behind glass, a pane shattered into radiant  
splinters. Face with warts and all, a trickle of sweat, folds of skin;  
but so clearly then, some thirty years ago, in the auditorium of  
"Muza" theater, on the walls, the plaster and the paneling  
its screen reflection spelled out: you can, doubting  
Tom, at high noon, so any time now, you can check for  
the mist on the glass jar, the bleeding of the pane, the pulsing of the star  
check for life, your own, placing half-blinded fingers on the world's wrists.

The ending of the poem, therefore, opens itself to universals and presents a moving description of existential experience: youthful initiation into freedom, loneliness, maturity, into feelings of the world's ungraspability, its mystery, beauty and suffering. Thus we could read the final lines of the poem.

Before this opening, however, we observe in "Behind Glass" a certain exegesis and sacralization of idiolect, an investigation into the nature, the substance of the

cucumber and its “freshness.” “Fresh pickled cucumber” as an idiom is permanently inscribed in a certain era, a certain domain and community; it is a condensate of some old-fashionedness and steadfastness, of quiet domestic resistance to oppression, to winds of history, to “the era of simplification” – once? Or now? All of its features – the thickness of the skin, the greenness (synthesis of the blue blood of noble ancestors and the yellow bile of unfulfilled present), the “garlic vigor,” the “upright” position, with dignity, packed tight in a collective jar, and finally the “freshness” (małosolność), synonymous with lack of fulfillment – somehow produce double meaning; they are qualities of cucumber matter, and at the same time trace a map of that formation, a social genotype of “mustachio / vilniuses and subcarpathians before the First War” lost in the modernity of the twentieth century. Along with this formation, its idiolect enters the poem through echoes of antiquated proverbs and sayings, here diluted and incomplete (like the “fresh” pickled cucumbers), and also in distress, because intertwined and undermined by some shreds of newspeak, newspaper language of television advertising lingo.

The whole text in general seems to recreate a form of cucumber jar. The narration becomes saturated with this paremiological, conservative and preservative ingredient like pickles in a jar with salt. Also, the formal shape of “Behind Glass” – its “tightness” of “packed” verses, which through their length seek to use every bit of room available with no respect for caesuras or syntax, and the absence of white space in the text resulting from the lack of division into stanzas – all those seem to have been adopted from the prototype form of cucumber jar.

As mentioned, the path of associations, which runs from prototypical “fresh pickled cucumber” leads to the opening of the poem onto an existential perspective. The initial image of kitchen at noon, of cucumbers and glass jars, will be repeated, though not literally, in the epiphanic final image, a frame from a movie watched “some thirty years ago, in the auditorium of / Muza theater”: *High Noon*, in which the face of Gary Cooper is also behind glass and its texture with “warts and all, a trickle of sweat, folds of skin” somehow resembles the unwavering aspect of cucumber in distress. At this point, in this epiphany of remembering, the narrative subject becomes in a sense finally personalized; it becomes someone's memory, biography, someone's life story. Everything previously described in the poem can be found in this biography, which cannot be separated from the pre-history it holds within, and from which it emerged into independent existence, capable of checking, of rebellion, confidence and freedom. And the key to this biography will always be the jars in the kitchen and the mysterious words: “fresh pickled cucumber.”

“Behind Glass” is a beautiful, poetically daring text, something radical and, like “Handrail,” maximalist in reaching out to the essence of time, history, biography, and language. A poem that is a praise of idiom, and is within the realm of Barańczak's individual poetics particularly revolting. It is like a return to linguistic poetics, which seemed to have subsided in American experience, withdrawn before the accumulation of images of the New World, and probably translational experiences (Bishop, Larkin, Merrill, Hardy, Frost, Auden). This time, however, the idiolect

word, which is in the center of the poem, hides beneath the surface of its singleness a whole universe, an infinity; it is the prototype, the mother-word, unlike before, when word had to be reminded of its referents and meanings, shown the way into the world.

The fascination with idiolect, and more broadly, the fascination with the amazing journey of "common places" (*loci communes*) within idiolects, across languages, times and cultures, the fascination with their existence how it is concealed in exotic subcodes appeared already in Barańczak's earlier works, such as in the poem *Wrzesień* ["September"] for the volume *Atlantis*:

W pokoju z biurkiem, tablicą i nie dającym się otworzyć oknem  
(klimatyzacja) wyjaśnia znaczenie zdania  
"goniąc za żywiołkami drobniejszego płazu"  
grupie złożonej z Mulata, Japonki, dwojga Anglosasów,  
nowojorskiego Żyda i kalifornijskiej Irlandki.  
... Za oknem wieżyczka Lowell House  
złoci się w słońcu, jak co roku świeżo odmalowana.  
... W promieniu  
co najmniej mili (1609,31 m)  
jeszcze przez dobre pięć minut oprócz niego nie będzie nikogo,  
kto by wiedział, co znaczą słowa "spólny łańcuch" oraz "ziemskie kolisko."

In a room with a desk, blackboard and a window that won't open  
(air conditioning) explains the meaning of the sentence  
"pursuing smaller molluscs for the sport alone"<sup>1</sup>  
to a group consisting of a Mulatto, a Japanese woman, two Anglo-Saxons,  
New York Jew and an Irishwoman from California.  
... Outside the window the tower of Lowell House  
golden in the sun, as every year, freshly repainted.  
... Within  
at least a mile (1609.31 m)  
for a good five minutes there won't be anyone apart from him  
who would know what it means to "encircle the vast world" with "chains  
of harmony."

This perfectly contemplative text, devoid of a clear thesis or message is the early record an intuition which in "Surgical Precision" will be developed in a series of poems. Note that *September* becomes crystallized through the astonishment at the distance between two idioms, that it arose at the point of intersection of the language idiom – a few words of a Slavic poet of the first half of the nineteenth century, and the spatial idiom – the image of a sunny day in an American college. The poem *Window*, also from *Atlantis* offers a similar record of interaction between two idioms: a picture of suburban landscape outside a closed window – the poet writes directly about the "idiom of afternoon" – meets imposed upon him a "soundtrack" – a greet-

<sup>1</sup> Mickiewicz, Adam. "Ode to Youth" *Adam Mickiewicz, 1798-1855: In Commemoration of the Centenary of His Death*. Paris: Unesco, 1955. 177-180. Print. (translated by George Rapall Noyes and Marjorie Beatrice Peacock)

ing addressed to a neighbor, spoken in a foreign language, “in which (next door) neighbor and (biblical) neighbor are one and the same / word.”

Thus, *September* and *Window* show a clash between the idiom of language and that of space. Here we are actually at the starting point a poetic concept, a certain idea which will be fully realized in “Surgical Precision.” That is because the area that is complementary to language idiom is in Barańczak’s latest volume precisely the idiom of space. Such spatial counterpoint to “Handrail” and “Behind Glass” can be found in much more extensive poems *Implozja* [“Implosion”] and the eponymous *Chirurgiczna precyzja* [“Surgical Precision”].

On the surface, the two texts could not be more different from the hermetic “Handrail” or “Behind Glass,” poems completely immersed in the element of language. However, I would like to suggest that “Implosion” and “Surgical Precision” are poems born of the same idea: to discover in the ordinary and peripheral quality of idiom and accident, a certain joke (an idea, a plan) of the Creator. Or, if you will, a mysterious principle of nature which states that perfection, genius, time, space and its absence, all these universal categories cannot exist outside form, substance, common matter, sensory and transitory concreteness.

Idioms and accidents are often subject to pitiful human depreciations; they can be ignored by physiognomists who establish the canon of male beauty (which is what the poem “Tenors” is about, indirectly), become the despised and shunned storyline of one’s own life, much less alluring and clear than the life of a hero in a romance film (“Tears in the Cinema”), or be considered a professional failure, like the glass clinking on the recording of Bill Evans’s concert (in “Hi-Fi”). However, it is the poet’s job not to be deceived by the apparent insignificance and dimensionlessness of the idiom, to possess the necessary intuition and to sense at least the existence of the code in the accident, even though decoding its signs, this “letter to the world” (“The Sender’s Problem”) is virtually impossible.

Thus, “Implosion” and “Surgical Precision.” Both poems appear to be quite loose and open poetic narratives. They seem to appear and vanish with their narrator, like quotes, a verbal event, a “soundtrack,” contaminated by the non-poetic extravagance of speech, the lack of poetic drama or a clear punchline.

“Implosion” is a record of the demolition of a high-rise belonging to an insurance company, a narration firmly anchored in a section of time and space, half journalistic, with a touch style of a local afternoon paper or radio station. What is striking here is the eagerness to record details, a slightly offhand visual perspective and a careful look at the transformation of space with a touch of personality of the narrator – a somewhat ironic, momentarily distanced commentator; a poet-witness? a reporter? a friendly neighbor?:

Od wczesnego rana  
tłum gromadził się wokół placiku – bariera  
i wozy policyjne, a więc nie napierał,  
raczej gęstniał i wierzył, że zapowiadana

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transmisja TV przegra w konkurencji z samym  
życiem (co wcale nie jest regułą). ...

... Szesnastopiętrowy  
wystawiony na słońce (jak ktoś nieświadomy,  
że opalanie się to krok do melanomy),  
smukły wieżowiec firmy ubezpieczeniowej

prężył swój biały beton i zielone szyby,  
stabilny, choć tak silnie party naszym wzrokiem.

From early morning  
the crowd gathered around the square – the barrier  
and police cars, so it didn't push,  
rather thickened and believed that the announced

TV broadcast would lose in competition with actual  
life (which is not the rule)...

Sixteen stories  
exposed to the sun (as someone unaware  
that sunbathing leads to melanoma),  
a slender tower block of insurance company  
flexed its white concrete and green windowpanes,  
stable, though so strongly pressured by our looks.

The personified narrative super-consciousness that has been introduced to this event does not shut the space of the poem; it is also just an event, a parallel one, with its jokes, ironies and *bons mots* which move parallel to the collapsing walls of the building and undulating emotions of the street audience. The reader will not experience complete identification with the persona; it will not be the authoritative "off-screen" voice from outside the poem which could explain the meaning of all this presentation, its poetic intention, which would reveal another level and the final message of the text.

The same characteristics of a verbal event, "captured" as if at a random section of time and space, can be observed in "Surgical Precision," a four-part poem, much longer than "Implosion." The chatty narrator's monologue is a slightly pretentious display of social eloquence in the form of reminiscing and commenting on the so-called current issues: politics, medicine, social behaviors, particularly regarding the surgical profession, with an addition of some personal anecdotes, gossip and hearsay about surgeons, a dose of pettifoggery, *political correctness* and encyclopedic erudition, full of rhetorical vigor and including a few witty comments in foreign languages. I think it would be a misunderstanding to read this poem with exaggerated attention to this discursive-anecdotal layer, to read it without the quotation marks, without realizing that in fact we are dealing with another type of *narrative idiom* present in Barańczak's collection. "Surgical Precision" is actually a narrative flow, captured in

a fairly random moment of someone's life and their linguistic activity, a record of existence. Existence in the idiom of time, space, language. Perhaps, as when reading "Implosion," the reader of "Surgical Precision" experiences something akin to a crisis of confidence, a lack of a stable foothold in the text, since the narrative subject immersed in this polyphony of its own plurality of expression, is unacceptable as an authority that would explain the overall meanings of the poem, and is not, we fell, the one holding the key to understanding the poem.

Can we then say that out of those four poems that particularly interest us here, "Implosion" and "Surgical Precision," these "reports from the world," it would seem semantically simple, filled with space, imagery and narration and devoid of ambiguity and poetic condensation, are actually more understandable, unambiguous, "lighter" than "Handrail" and "Behind Glass," both saturated with dark surprising linguistic associations and developing vague "substantial" exegeses, entering the microcosm of words and matter? Here is how we come to the key paradox: in poems where the figure of the narrator and the idiom of space were specifically emphasized, i.e. "Implosion" and "Surgical Precision," the lyrical subject is in fact equally internalized and the sense of those poems is situated as much outside the referential function of words and sentences, as it is in the case of "hermetic" poems, those focused on idiolect and the mother-word from which they derive their narration and poetic potential.

One could go further; the perceived difficulty of reading somehow connects the two pairs of texts and in a way opens the chance of a complete reading and discovery of the problem of idiom. The reading trauma experienced in contact with, on the one hand, "Handrail" and "Behind Glass" which eliminate the commentator and seem extremely hermetic, arbitrarily enclosing their space in a single word or object, and on the other hand "Implosion" and "Surgical Precision," which are disturbing because the imposing presence of the commentator and equally arbitrary opening of space, should provoke us to transfer the reading of these texts and of the whole volume to a higher level, to seek a common principle, the principle of idiom. It is difficult to say whether what we observe here is a poetic strategy intended by the author. But the fact is that the four interpreted poems constitute the center for the problem of idiom in Barańczak's collection and testify to the author's poetic and philosophical fascination with the topic; they appear to be "watching" each other and by identifying tensions, antinomies and symmetries which exist between them it is possible to understand the crucial theme in the whole of "Surgical Precision."

With that in mind, let us go back to the poems "Implosion" and "Surgical Precision" and try to answer the question: what meanings, hidden in the idiom of space and narration, are to be found in these works?

"Implosion" in some respects resembles Barańczak's "Birdwatchers" [*Obserwatorzy ptaków*] from the volume *A Postcard from the Other World*. The latter transcends the limits of genre scene, or a collection of trip impressions, which it seems to be at first. From a certain point the bird watchers are themselves being watched by some "inner eye" of the poem. From this perspective their communal perfectionism and

hobby celebrations appear to be as much an entry into the world of ornithology, as an escape from the world of no classification, from realizing their painful existential singularity. This idea is reflected at the end of the poem:

Więc świat może jest po to, by przeszył, otworzył  
nas czasem znak, jak strzałka: "JESTEŚ TUTAJ:  
wśród ludzi, obcych, ale jesteście – zaufaj –  
po jednej stronie, współobserwatorzy  
ptaków, pogody, innych rzeczy."

So the world might be in order to pierce and open  
us sometimes with a sign like arrow: "YOU ARE HERE:  
among men, strangers, but you are – trust –  
on one side, co-watchers  
of birds, weather, other things. "

However, it seems that "Implosion," unlike *Birdwatchers*, is immersed in the idiom of time and space incomparably deeper and, perhaps, completely. Just like "Surgical Precision" is totally immersed in the idiom of speech and idiom of narration. In both these poems the absence of commentary is in some sense a commentary itself. These poems in particular, through their lack of thematic message, their radical entanglement with the sensuality of space ("Implosion"), with the flesh of language, narrative vigor and plurality of expression ("Surgical Precision"), point with unusual intensity at an *alternative reality* that was not described, or expressed in them. They point to the *non-being or non-existence* ("Implosion") and *silence and mystery* ("Surgical Precision"), categories not subject to human description and verbalization, and in fact, belonging to the transcendent space. And it is these that are actually the poetic theme, the "great absentee" in "Implosion" and "Surgical Precision." The main theme of "Implosion" – a poem so intensely preoccupied with matter and existence, is its opposite – non-existence. The main theme of "Surgical Precision" – so intensely "spoken" – is eventually that which was not said – silence. Each of these poems indicates its opposite in that it arbitrarily singles out a random part of space, a random part of someone's monologue, and in the way that these fragments continue in their lack of justification, since the lyrical narrator in both texts belongs entirely to the realm of idiom, the sphere of the expressible, opposite of which remains the Inexpressible. Such is the character of poetic operation in these texts. Both of these poems, so strongly rooted in the idiom of everyday life, turn out to be in the deepest sense philosophical, touching with the whole of their surface and thus reflecting that which cannot be named, described, or presented in any way.

The middle section of "Implosion" is the scene of collapse of the building and slow contemplation of the three dimensions of space. The rhythm of the poetic description for moment seems to coincide with the rhythm of the structure's dissolution, perfectly exhausting the dramatic potential of all phases of the process without a single unnecessary word. With this purely poetic slowing down of perception, the sequence holds for a moment the disintegration of matter, and leads the poem

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outside the limits of the immediate playful relation and into the space of geometric abstraction. (Incidentally, we could probably sense some metaphysical overtones in the fact that majestically collapsing building belongs to an insurance company):

najpierw szkło okien  
bezgłośnie wzduło się i rozprysło, jak gdyby  
  
pod jednoczesnym ciosem kilku setek pięści,  
po sekundzie popartych wielokrotnym grzmotem;  
wschodnia fasada, najpierw dziwnie wolno, potem  
coraz nieodwracalniej, jakby coraz cięższy  
  
był dla niej obowiązek zachowania twarzy,  
osunęła się; za nią, po spirali, prędko,  
eksplozje przemykały się z piętra na piętro;  
nowe grzmoty; przekroje biur i korytarzy,  
  
złapanych na zaledwie wystyglým uczynku  
pustki wewnątrz; zapaści, pionowe i tępe,  
ścian; harmonijkowate składanie się pięter;  
jeszcze nie opadł na to wszystko dach budynku –  
  
już ogromny kłęb pyłu rósł mu na spotkanie;  
łoskot trwał jeszcze – już go pochłaniała wrzawa,  
gwizdy, oklaski ....

first the glass windows  
silently swelled and were shattered, as if  
  
hit at one moment by a few hundred fists,  
in a second supported by multiple thunder;  
the eastern facade, oddly slow at first, then  
more irreversibly, as if it was harder  
  
and harder to maintain face,  
sank down, and after, in a spiral, quickly,  
explosions darted from floor to floor;  
new thunders; sections of offices and hallways,  
  
caught in the act barely getting cold  
emptiness inside; collapses, vertical and dull,  
of walls, floors folding up like a paper fan  
the roof did not yet settle upon it all –  
  
and already a huge cloud of dust rose up to meet it;  
the noise still rang – yet already absorbed by clamor,  
whistles, applause

Thus “Implosion,” so intensely “frozen” in existence, in the idiom of real space, simultaneously and silently suggests, or rather implies a complementary space – of Non-being. At the end of the poem the narrator and witness to the event records the



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cooling down of emotions of spectators after the successful collapse of the building, casually alluding to something that "is behind us and was left behind":

... So that's it? Yes, it is. It's past nine.  
The crowd goes back to where cars are parked.  
  
carried by the wind bits of pink fibers  
used for sealing, clouds of brown dust  
squeeze into the streets, chasing us. Something was  
ceased to be: there is a vacuum, visible, slender.  
But that is behind us and was left behind.

The narrator, being one of us, carelessly, recklessly abandons the accident, just when something begins to open up, when one should start to look carefully, because another story begins, here signaled by the ending and the subtle breach of the poems shape: an additional, "superfluous" line that starts something we, who are seduced by tangibility, who are slaves of the senses and incorrigible empiricists leaving the scene of the event, will not experience, nor sense.

How about "Surgical Precision"? Does this poem, like "Implosion," carry hidden signals indicating that its visible world, the order of the narrative, its human emotions, omniscient quivering, rhetorical *elephantiasis*, in fact the whole idiom of speech is actually there *instead*; instead of silence, instead of some transcendent code or message with which this monologue, a universal human monologue, will never meet, but which it will always miss? Such a signal can undoubtedly be found at the end of the poem. Similarly to "Implosion" the ending has a texture of a shimmering hologram, its own poetic ambiguity. The cartoon joke about surgeons it summarizes is yet another scene belonging to the genre of black humor, perfectly positioned in the whole sequence of similar anecdotes present in the monologue. At the same time, however, such ending of the poem actually revokes the significance of the monologue itself, placing it in quotation marks; everything that was said may only serve to designate a blank space left by a mystery that is ungraspable and extraverbal:

Rysunek: operacja w toku; pochylone  
plecy chirurgów tworzą spoistą zasłonę,

ponad którą wystrzela jak z procy, wysoko,  
śliszki wewnętrzny organ (śledziona, na oko)

a główny chirurg wrzeszczy obecnym w tej scenie:  
"Nie wyrzucać – to może mieć jakieś znaczenie!"

Nie demiurgiem – chirurgiem być, chociażby takim:  
nie bardzo precyzyjnym, niepewnym, co znakiem

a co przypadkiem, ale, gdy czegoś dotyka,  
świadomym, że jest ważne to, co się wymyka.

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Cartoon: operation in progress; the surgeons'  
backs serve as kind of bodily curtain

over which shoots out high above the team  
a slippery internal organ (seems to me, a spleen)

and the chief surgeon yells at those in the room:  
"Do not throw away – we may need it soon!"

Not god, but a surgeon seems better career,  
even one not precise and often unclear

what a symptom is and what simply a coincidence,  
but one that when touching can get a clear sense

of things' weight and confidently be able to say  
that important is that which is slipping away.

Perhaps the same thought about man's inevitable missing of what is significant, about the diverging paths of human experience and of the unknowable, is also inscribed into the structure of "Surgical Precision." One could wonder about the arbitrarily changing form of stanzas in the poem, and, perhaps more importantly, about that form's incompatibility with the logical framework of narration. This meaningful lack of precision, the mid-sentence and mid-thought breaks in the flow of the monologue, caused by variation in the form of the stanza could suggest that the whole architecture of the poem, including its arbitrary division into four parts, is governed by some strange and mysterious logic, not identified with the intention of the monologist. The latter's "surgical" story, moving forward with a narrative vigor and a slightly narcissistic self-confidence of someone who never found words and language to resist the process of articulating the world, is confronted with the logic of a higher order. A different, competing rhythm, superimposed on the poetic monologue, seems to be encoded in the text, in its extraverbal space, in the form of a message: "we speak of, name and describe the world, but our discourse forever misses the world's true pulse; it is always speaking beside the world."

An issue not to be missed in the consideration of "Surgical Precision" is the very clear autothematic, as well as autobiographical character of the poem. The monologuing narrator is an Everyman, but also Stanisław Barańczak the poet, author of the text. The poem is saturated in a humorous and self-ironic way with the idiom of the author's biography and works. It contains a biographical thread, recognizable by no small group of readers: the story of an operation the poet underwent after leaving the country:

wyrostek, przewieziony w brzuchu przez Atlanty  
(zapomniany appendix mojej kontrabandy),

odezwał się – a byłem dawno po czterdziestce –  
i narobił kłopotów: nie dość, że pękł, jeszcze

wszystko wokół zakaził, jakby kamikaze  
darł się we mnie: "Mam zginać? Dobrze, gińmy razem!"

the appendix that I smuggled across the Atlantic  
in my belly (forgotten) began crazy antics

I've been long in my forties and this was the first  
time it caused trouble, then decided to burst,

and infect all around, as kamikaze fighter  
it screamed: "If I die, you won't make it either."

At the same time the poems bears some characteristics of poetic self-paraphrase; by changing the outline of the stanza four time, it becomes a kind of a gallery of Stanisław Barańczak's poetic formats, a "final revision," a display of self-quoted capabilities of Barańczak-the poet.

By applying the idiom of his own biography and poetics, the author of "Surgical Precision" places himself and his work on the side of this universal monologue that will never be completed, will never reach the essence, the mystery, since those are on the side of Silence. I think it is worth noting that serene self-irony inscribed in the poem and in its concept, which is binding the "winded" monologue, transitory in its mental fads, in its anecdotal randomness and grandiloquence, in a complex, variable structural pattern of rhymes and stanzas. In "Surgical Precision" one can also encounter, albeit significantly changed, many a "figure" known from Barańczak's poetry. As in the first part of the poem when we read through a sentence of almost Proustian proportions, with unusually lengthy embedded elements, and with a sigh of relief after a stanza and a half we welcome its ending, along with the fact that in spite of numerous included digressions, it turned out to be perfectly "written out" in lines and rhymes, and fortunately saved its ultimately unquestionable logic.

According to the principle I have already described here, the more visible and powerful the autobiographical element in "Surgical Precision," the more it points in the direction of its opposite – the transience of life – present like a negative throughout the monologue, in its entanglement in the "now," in the accelerated respiration which is life's too ostentatious manifestation. Autothematism, on the other hand, communicates the inevitable moment when one's work misses the Mystery that escapes poetic expression, the result of which can be a humorous poetic "hyperactivity" of the author in this poem. And I think that this autothematic frame, bearing the message: "My poems are just uncertain indications of something that we should not "throw away" as "we may need it soon"" helps to understand why "Surgical Precision" gave its title to the entire collection and in some sense supports all of Stanisław Barańczak's work, so much inclined towards the Unknowable.

*Translation: Paweł Pyrka*

## Małgorzata CZERMIŃSKA

### Ekphrases in the Poetry of Wisława Szymborska<sup>1</sup>

A study of *ekphrasis* in Szymborska's work may seem a misguided idea. The poet dedicated few poems to works of art, and critics have already identified and analyzed them.<sup>2</sup> So far, however, I have come across no attempt to apply the concept of *ekphrasis* in the interpretation of Szymborska's poems (except some occasional uses by Joanna Grądział and Wojciech Ligęza), although the eponymous poems in one of the volumes, namely "Ludzie na moście" (1986) [The People on the Bridge] is a model example. Other attempts appear quite early, at the very beginnings of the poet's work, namely in "Malowidło w Pałacu Zimowym" [The Painting in the Winter Palace] (in the volume *Pytania zadawane sobie* 1954 [Questions to Oneself]),<sup>3</sup> and in "Dwie małpy Breugla" [Brueghel's

<sup>1</sup> The following paper was written for *Wisława Szymborska's Poetry*, an international conference, which was organized in May 2003 in Stockholm by the Royal Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities in cooperation with departments of Slavic Studies of universities in Stockholm and Uppsala; it will be published in the volume of conference proceedings. Polish version is published by the organizers' gracious consent.

<sup>2</sup> Faryno, J. „Semiotyeczne aspekty poezji o sztuce. Na przykładzie wierszy Wisławy Szymborskiej,” *Pamiętnik Literacki* 1975 vol. 4; J. Kwiatkowski „Arcydziełka Szymborskiej,” in: *Radość czytania Szymborskiej. Wybór tekstów krytycznych*, ed. S. Balbus, D. Wojda, Kraków 1996 (original sketch was prepared in 1977); J. Grądział „Świat sztuki w poezji Wisławy Szymborskiej,” *Pamiętnik Literacki* 1996 vol. 2; W. Ligęza *O poezji Wisławy Szymborskiej. Świat w stanie korekty*, Kraków 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Anna Bikont and Joanna Szczesna note (*Pamiętkowe rupiecie, przyjaciele i sny Wisławy Szymborskiej*, Warszawa 1997, pp. 113-115) that the poem's motto was „With authentic event In the background,” but asked about it the poet could not recall where she had

Two Monkeys] (*Wołanie do Yeti* 1957) [Calling Out to Yeti, 1957), while later we can find them in almost every volume. Only Leonard Neuger, when interpreting “Elegia podróżna” [Travel Elegy], noticed a hidden reflection on *ekphrasis*, but at the same time assumed that it is understood by the poet to be a challenge that cannot be met.<sup>4</sup> The critic comes to the conclusion that despite the ineffability of the experience and the resulting impossibility of *ekphrasis*, the poem speaks of the necessity of undertaking this task over and over again. The evidence of the poet’s belief in ineffability is, however, not completely convincing here, as it is supported by a quote from a different poem by Szymborska.

My reading of “Travel Elegy” emphasizes the problem of the unreliability of memory, which Neuger underestimates. In my opinion the motivation behind the elegiac mood in the poem (in fact quite humorously treated) is not so much the difficulty of *ekphrasis*, as the fleeting character of impressions of the journey. Evidence of this is in the first stanza, also repeated later in the text. Both the initial appearance with its particular semantic character, and the repetition bid the reader to treat the thought contained in the stanza as the key idea of the poem. It is an idea of the wealth of experience in the present (“everything”), which is opposed to the scarcity of what remains in memory (“nothing...to hold”):

Everything's mine but just on loan,  
nothing for the memory to hold,  
though mine as long as I look.

The theme of merciless oblivion returns two more times in the poem:

Memories come to mind like excavated statues  
that have misplaced their heads.  
...  
I won't retain one blade of grass  
as it's truly seen. (Szymborska 29, 31)<sup>5</sup>

Neuger is right to point out that the issue of necessity and at the same time impossibility or at least difficulty involved in *ekphrasis* appears in Szymborska’s texts as a matter of importance and one worthy of consideration, not in “Travel Elegy,” however. On the other hand, I would agree that we can observe the echo of that thought in the poem “Clochard,” which I will discuss soon.

*Ekphrasis* is one of those devices adapted by literature from rhetoric which has aroused great interest recently among literary theorists, because of its relevance

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read about it. The two authors suggest that the anecdoter might have been referring to the painting in the so-called “Hall of Fame” or The War Gallery of 1812 in the Winter Palace (reprint of “The Painting...” in *Wiersze wybrane*, Warszawa 1964; without the motto)

<sup>4</sup> Neuger, L. „Biedna Uppsala z odrobiną wielkiej katedry (Próba lektury “Elegii podróżnej” Wisławy Szymborskiej),” in: *Radość czytania...*

<sup>5</sup> Szymborska, Wisława, trans. Stanisław Barańczak, and Clare Cavanagh. *Nothing Twice: Selected Poems*. Kraków: Wydawn. Literackie, 1997. 29, 31.

to the consideration of the linguistic capabilities of presenting extraverbal reality, and of the relationship between word and image. It is not the goal of this text to elaborate on the subject discussed in many book and even more articles.<sup>6</sup> However I will reiterate, on the basis of various sources, that *ekphrasis* (or *descriptio*) as a figure of thought, also called *hypotyposis* (*evidentia*) is a description which visualizes with such clarity that the listener, according to Quintilian, will have the impression that they can actually see the described object, rather than simply hear the sound of words. Over time, the meaning of the term *ekphrasis* was limited to the description of a work of art (painting, sculpture or buildings), which is either incorporated into a larger whole (e.g. narrative), or is a separate text then treated as a realization of the genre.<sup>7</sup> *Ekphrasis* acquired its genological distinctiveness in late antiquity in the Byzantine Empire, and it owes its permanent presence in the literary tradition in part to the fact that for centuries (until the eighteenth century) it was one of the mandatory exercises in the teaching of rhetoric in schools. (Ziomek 91, Michałowska 94-5)<sup>8</sup>

Contemporary poets are not concerned about the requirements of *Ratio Studiorum*, but traces of genre conventions have survived in poetic realizations, such as in the standard example of Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" or explicitly classicist, not only in style, but also in its theme, "Na biust rzymski w muzeum w Spirze" [On the Roman Bust in the Museum in Speyer] by Iwaszkiewicz from the volume *Powrót do Europy* [Return to Europe]. The title or the text of a poems should include a reference to the described work of art – its author, title or a characteristic feature that allows it to be identified. Sometimes the subject of the description may not be a single work of art, but a whole class of them, e.g. representing the work of a famous artist, a school, a genre or an era. *Ekphrasis* involves the belief in the visual potential of words and their superiority over images. Michał Paweł Markowski notes that the concept of *ekphrasis* contains a paradox, which is at the same time the paradox of any representation:

On the one hand, it seeks to visualize the object (by showing the object of description), on the other hand it does everything to emphasize the method of its presentation (narration or description). (Markowski 13)<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Markowski, M.P. „*Ekphrasis*. Uwagi bibliograficzne z dołączeniem krótkiego komentarza,” *Pamiętnik Literacki* 1999 vol. 2; and *Pragnienie obecności. Filozofie reprezentacji od Platona do Kartezjusza*, Gdańsk 1999 (especially the chapter *Prolog. Ikony i idole*).

<sup>7</sup> Krzywy, R. „Konwencja i autopsja w opisie dzieł sztuki na przykładzie ekfraz kościoła Mądrości Bożej w poezji barokowej” *Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis* no. 2011, *Prace Literackie* XXXVI, Wrocław 1998; R. Popowski „Retoryka w późnoantycznych opisach dzieł sztuki” in: *Retoryka antyczna i jej dziedzictwo*, ed. J. Axer, Warszawa 1996.

<sup>8</sup> Ziomek, J. *Retoryka opisowa*, Wrocław 1990. 91; T. Michałowska, „Poetyka i poezja (problemy interpretacji poezji staropolskiej)” in: *Zagadnienia literaturoznawczej interpretacji*, eds. J. Sławiński, J. Święch. Wrocław 1979. 94-95.

<sup>9</sup> Markowski, M.P. *Pragnienie obecności. Filozofie reprezentacji od Platona do Kartezjusza*, Gdańsk 1999. 13.

The effect of this paradox is well illustrated by Szymborska's poems, since the poet always makes use of stylized language, specially chosen vocabulary and word building techniques, which characterize the work of art no less vividly than the actual meaning of words. The poet translates visual signs in literary ones not only thanks to such stylistic treatments, but also through appropriate structures of discourse. In addition to description, which is typical of *ekphrasis*, she introduces dialogue, narration in the form of mini-anecdotes, or chooses to dramatize what is shown in the picture. These operations allow for the proliferation of metaphorical meanings and associations which can produce a much richer, subtler and more concise interpretation than would be possible through literal language and with the use of scientific terminology of art history.

The author of "Rubens' Women" not only wrote about a dozen poems that can be located within the above definition of *ekphrasis* as a genre of expression, but also spoke out openly about her way of understanding the possibilities of description of works of art. In one of a series of short sketches called *Lektury nadobowiażkowe* [Optional Reading], while discussing the book by Aleksandra Ołędzka-Frybesowa *Z Paryża w przeszłość* (1973), she gives praise to the value of literary description, even though we live in the age of the ubiquitous visual culture and the possibility of direct access to original works of art:

Even today there exist in literary description certain aspects that have by no means been devalued. First of all, in the description the time passes much slower, if not quite differently. There is room for reflection, far-reaching associations and all the other delights of contemplation... So let's observe whatever is to be observed, let's journey whenever the opportunity arises, let's sightsee as much as possible. But if we sometimes feel sorry that the image on the screen flashes before our eyes never to return, if, while travelling, it suddenly turns out that we have ten minutes to see Van Eyck's altar, or that we cannot see Vermeer for the endless crowds, that tight shoes have spoiled the joy of exploring the Alhambra, let's get the book and return to the staid literary description... Having said that I could now move on to another topic, but I would like to bring up one more advantage of this quiet and honest prose. It is the ability to describe architecture. For if painting can be quite easily described, architecture reluctantly surrenders to words. When capturing spaciousness, we lose the details, and vice versa. And it is horribly difficult to express its mobile immobility. I'm talking, of course, of the treasures of old architecture. (Szymborska 43)<sup>10</sup>

The statement about the relative ease of describing painting in comparison with architecture may seem surprising at first, but we should remember that when the poet said this, she had already written poems such as "Brueghel's Two Monkeys," "Rubens' Women" or "A Byzantine Mosaic," all dedicated to the interpretation of pictures. And "Clochard," in which she decided not to describe the Notre-Dame Cathedral in the belief that"

<sup>10</sup> Szymborska, W. *Lektury nadobowiażkowe. Część druga*. Kraków 1981. 43.

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(not built, no, rather  
played upon a lute)

Even the supplicatory sigh: “save me, sacred folly of description!” did not help in this task. Here the poet truly abandoned *ekphrasis* as impossible, unable to even finish the sentence:

in a Paris like —  
in a Paris which — (Szyborska 25)<sup>11</sup>

And, as we remember, instead of describing Gothic architecture, decided to speak about the tramp sleeping in the garden outside the walls of the Cathedral in a pose reminiscent of medieval sculptures found upon tombs.

Belief in the visualizing power of the word is not always as unwavering in Szyborska's texts as it is in the discussion of Olędzka-Frybesowa's book. A little earlier in *Optional Reading*, when mentioning the release of an album with reproductions of Vermeer's works (1970), the poet wrote:

To describe Vermeer's paintings with words is a futile task. A much better means of expression would be music for a string quartet, with two violins, a bassoon and a harp. (Szyborska 33)<sup>12</sup>

Emerging here is a sort of private hierarchy of arts, in which Szyborska seems to place music at the highest position, because, after all, even the indescribable beauty of Notre-Dame is not in the fact that it was built, but “rather played upon a lute.” However, when writing further on Vermeer, the poet grants art historians the right to attempt an effort to create a verbal description, “as such is their vocation and profession.” (n.b. this type of *ekphrasis* is called critical by scholars, to differentiate it from literary *ekphrasis*<sup>13</sup>). Szyborska herself immediately makes use of the right of description granted to art historians, but mainly in order to enter into a dispute with an author writing about Vermeer, one whose interpretations did not convince the poet. She ends her essay with two miniature ekphrases, of which I will quote the second one because of its polemical vigor:

I look and it all seems wrong. I can see the miraculous light of day touching different kinds of matter: the human skin, the silk of robes, the chair's upholstery and the whitewashed wall; a miracle that Vermeer repeats constantly, but ever in new versions and with fresh glare. Where is that coldness and alienation? What would those even refer to? The woman puts her hands on the spinet, as if she wanted to play a passage, perhaps for fun or to recall it. She turns her head towards us with a pretty half-smile on a not very comely face. In that smile there is thoughtfulness and a pinch of maternal indulgence. And so she has looked at us, including the critics, for three hundred years. (Szyborska 34)<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Szyborska, Wisława, trans. Stanisław Barańczak, and Clare Cavanagh. *Nothing Twice: Selected Poems*. Kraków: Wydawn. Literackie, 1997. 25.

<sup>12</sup> Szyborska, W. *Lektury nadobowiązkowe*. Kraków 1981. 33.

<sup>13</sup> The difference between literary and critical ekphrases, introduced by M. Rifaterre is discussed by A. Dziadek in the essay “Problem *ekphrasis* – dwa Widoki Delft (Adam Czerniawski i Adam Zagajewski)” *Teksty Drugie* 2000 no. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Szyborska, W. *Lektury nadobowiązkowe*. Kraków 1981. 34.



This trust in the word and in poetry, expressed directly in the above sketches, and culminating in the poem “Radość pisanía” [The Joy of Writing], although always counterpointed by a slight shadow of irony, is present in all of Szymborska's poetic ekphrases. Let us now briefly review the poems that can be included in this genre, starting with the most striking and undeniable examples. “Brueghel's Two Monkeys” and “The People on the Bridge” are texts that could illustrate a dictionary definition of *ekphrasis*. The first includes the exact title of the painting and the artist's name together with a brief, but extremely precise description of the background and the two monkeys. Its interpretative framework is a nightmare in which one needs to retake the matriculation examination. The poet decodes the message of the painting as a bitterly ironic accusation of cruelty, known from her other poems, such as “Małpa” [Monkey], “Tarsjusz” [Tarsier], and “Tortury” [Tortures].

In “The People on the Bridge” the description of what is in the painting is again concise and detailed at the same time, the name of the painter, Hiroshige, appears in the text, and the identity of the specific work can be found in the English collection of Szymborska's poems, *People on a Bridge*, translated and published by Adam Czerniawski, which reproduces on its cover the Japanese artist's color woodcut from the British Museum's collection, entitled “Ohashi Bridge in the Rain.”<sup>15</sup> Here, too, the precise description of the image is not an end in itself, but a means to formulate a useful reflection on the artist's victory over time, a reflection similar to that which is found in the final sentences of “The Joy of Writing”:

The joy of writing.  
The power of preserving.  
Revenge of a mortal hand. (Szymborska 63)<sup>16</sup>

In Szymborska's other ekphrases we can no longer as surely identify a particular work as a prototype for the description. In the case of “Miniatura średniowieczna” [A Medieval Miniature] critics cite as the probable source of inspiration “Matins” painted by the Limbourg brothers for the Duke de Berry, except that the poem depicts a scene more or less corresponding to the two miniatures “July” and “August” with the addition of elements not present there. (Kwiatkowski 356, Ligęza 179)

Whereas whosoever is downcast and weary,  
cross-eyed and out at elbows,  
is most manifestly left out of the scene.

Even the least pressing of questions,  
burgherish or peasantish,  
cannot survive beneath this most azure of skies.

<sup>15</sup> Czerniawski In a translator's note thanks Richard Edgcumbe for his help in identifying which of the color woodcuts by Hiroshige Utagawa was the inspiration for the poem. (Cf. W. Szymborska *People on a bridge. Poems*, introduced and translated by A. Czerniawski, London–Boston 1996. xvi.

<sup>16</sup> Szymborska, Wisława, trans. Stanisław Barańczak, and Clare Cavanagh. *Nothing Twice: Selected Poems*. Kraków: Wydawn. Literackie, 1997. 63.

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And not even the eaglest of eyes  
could spy even the tiniest of gallows —  
nothing casts the slightest shadow of a doubt.

Thus they proceed most pleasantly  
through this feudalest of realisms.

This same, however, has seen to the scene's balance:  
it has given them their Hell in the next frame. (Szymborska 199, 201)<sup>17</sup>

I think that these absent elements, drawn from a “second picture,” could have been found by the poet in a much later cycle called “Seasons” by another favorite painter of hers, whose style creates a clear counterweight to the sweetness of Limbourg brothers’ miniatures, namely Pieter Brueghel the Elder. In “A Medieval Miniature” the most important means of characterizing the style of painting is the stylization of language: the humorously treated archaisation and the word-building experiments with forms of superlatives, which probably would have been appreciated by Gombrowicz, the author of *Trans-Atlantyk*:

Up the verdantest of hills,  
in this most equestrian of pageants,  
wearing the silkiest of cloaks.  
...  
all chivalry and rivalry,  
so if the first is fearsome of countenance,  
the next one strives to be more daunting still,  
and if he prances on a bay steed  
the third will prance upon a bayer,  
and all twelve hooves dance glancingly  
atop the most wayside of daisies. (Szymborska 199)

In several other poems can be found a synthetic characterization of style, rather than reference to a specific, individual work. In an interview, the poet said:

“I was asked ... which of Rubens’ paintings inspired me to write “Rubens’ Women.” Of course there is no such painting. It is a description of the style” (Szymborska 96).<sup>18</sup>

It seems that a similar situation can be found in “Mozaika bizantyjska” [A Byzantine Mosaic]. Yet even in those ekphrases where the depicted work can be identified with certainty, or at least very high degree of probability, Szymborska’s poems direct the attention of a reader through specific elements toward the impression of style as a whole. In “Rubens’ Women,” the description of a painting which does not exist, but is still most “probable” in terms of subject and style, can serve not

<sup>17</sup> Szymborska, Wisława, trans. Stanisław Barańczak, and Clare Cavanagh. *Nothing Twice: Selected Poems*. Kraków: Wydawn. Literackie, 1997. 199, 201.

<sup>18</sup> *Powrót do źródeł. Rozmowa z Wisławą Szymborską*, in: K. Nastulanka *Sami o sobie. Rozmowy z pisarzami i uczonymi*, Warszawa 1975, p. 306; qtd. in J. Grądział *Świat sztuki...*, p. 96.

only to characterize the painter, but also to juxtapose the two types of femininity, or rather two different ways of presenting the female body in art. One is precisely the lush sensuality of full, baroque shapes, relying on physiology, the other an ascetic spirituality of slim, fleeting, bird-like women of the Middle Ages, in whose presentation the poet finds a surprising foreshadowing of the contemporary worship of the slender figure of movie stars:

The thirteenth century would have given them golden haloes.  
The twentieth, silver screens.  
The seventeenth, alas, holds nothing for the unvoluptuous. (Szymborska 35)<sup>19</sup>

The same opposition emerges in “A Byzantine Mosaic” where the ascetic ideal of early medieval carnality, modestly hidden under a loose and rigid garment is contrasted with the nudity of a baby whose beauty is that of baroque putto and clearly belongs among “Rubens’ Women”:

Pink and shameless as a piglet,  
plump and merry, verily,  
all chubby wrists and ringlets came he (85,87)

“A Byzantine Mosaic” is comprised wholly of dialogue. It might seem a violation of the rules of *ekphrasis* which relies completely on description; however, some features of mosaic-style representations from the time of the late Empire and some elements of Byzantine culture are perfectly depicted not only through the attribution in the title, but also thanks to the archaic stylization of language, appropriate vocabulary and epithets. Wojciech Ligęza convincingly showed the presence of slightly humorous stylization which recalls the lovers’ exchanges in “Song of Songs” and the subtext of such knowledge about the life of the Byzantines as can be gained for example from *Secret History* by Procopius of Caesarea (Ligęza 184-6). We can guess that the imperial couple do not neglect their marital duties, since at the beginning of the conversation they assure each other of mutual admiration for their attractiveness, and since there is a fruit of their relationship: a newborn son. The dialogue of the spouses allows us to also draw conclusions about the mentality of the era. The model of physical beauty is clearly ascetic; it assumes shyness and fear of nudity, as in the case of the thirteenth-century painting contrasted with Baroque presentation in the poem about Rubens.

The subject of the imperial couple’s conversation: the birth of unexpectedly plump baby reinforces the impression that we are not dealing with an exact *ekphrasis* of the mosaic depicting the Empress Theodora and the Emperor Justinian together with their accompanying retinue in the church of San Vitale in Ravenna. However, the humorously pathetic names –Theotropia and Theodendron – and their “godly dignity” make the mosaics of San Vitale one of the possible sources of inspiration. The hieratic stiffness of appearance and behavior suggested in the poem reflects the type

<sup>19</sup> Szymborska, Wisława, trans. Stanisław Barańczak, and Clare Cavanagh. *Nothing Twice: Selected Poems*. Kraków: Wydawn. Literackie, 1997. 35.

of silhouettes presented in Byzantine mosaics that Ravenna is famous for. Therefore a minor detail in Lięęza's otherwise thorough investigation might be corrected: "

The association of women's palms with palm leaves probably refers to the famous mosaics in the church of San Vitale in Ravenna (sixth century), presenting the retinue of the Empress Theodora" (184).

No palm leaves can be found in the mosaic of Theodora, nor in that of Justinian, but they are a characteristic and frequently repeated element in the mosaics of another church in Ravenna, namely San Apolinar Nuovo. If these are indeed the source of inspiration for the poet, we are dealing with a cross-contamination of several works of art, analogous to the case of synthetic characterization of Rubens' style or the presentation of medieval miniatures.

The landscape with trees, a path which "undoubtedly reaches its goal," a peasant woman and a house, which is shown in the poem "Pejzaż" [Landscape], could have come from the brush of one of the Dutch masters. Lięęza's findings indicate that the subject of *ekphrasis* here is Meindert Hobbema's painting from the National Gallery in London "The Road to Middelharnis" (1689). The description in the poem indeed corresponds to a number of details in the painting which is known as an example of perfectly balanced and symmetrical composition, in which the artist "has achieved great level of expression, conveying a desire for escape and the poetry of infinity" (Gennaille 98).<sup>20</sup> The first lines of the poems pretend to be descriptive, but soon turn out to be the beginning of a monologue delivered by a modern woman, suddenly embodied in the figure painted in the picture. At the same time she addresses her man who remained in the present time and is standing in front of the painting. Her monologue includes two points of view, as in the trick of dependent speech, when the speaker in the same sentence combines the mentality of a seventeenth-century peasant with the intellectual distance of a contemporary woman. The idea which can only be realized in literary work: that the viewer of the painting "enters" into it and identifies with the painted figure, at the same time retaining the ability to talk about it to another viewer standing in front of it serves as a reflection on the boundary between life and art, past and present, as well as on the sense of strangeness that can suddenly come between people who are close to each other, and invasive feeling as if they were separated by centuries.

"Fetysz płodności z paleolitu" [A Palaeolithic Fertility Fetish], so far Szymborska's only poem describing a sculpture, relates to yet another concept of femininity. Although details presented in the poem correspond exactly to the appearance of the famous Venus of Willendorf, the poet decides not to use this name for the character, instead calling her the Great Mother, a name from ancient fertility cults.<sup>21</sup> This primal femininity is also abundant in shape and presented exclusively in a physical and impersonal dimension as we have seen in the *ekphrasis* of Rubens, yet its

<sup>20</sup> Gennaille, R. *Słownik malarstwa holenderskiego i flamandzkiego*, trans. E. Maliszewska, H. Secomska, Warszawa 1975. 98. Cf. also M. Praz *Mnemozyne. Rzecz o powinowactwie literatury i sztuk plastycznych*, trans. W. Jekięł, Warszawa 1981. 224.

<sup>21</sup> Grądziel, J. *Świat sztuki*. 99.

meaning does not refer to sexual desire, but to the nature's power of motherhood, its elemental life-giving force. In the description of the figurine we encounter the style of everyday speech, simple phrases typical of spoken language and characteristic of someone who focuses on a few basic categories outlined by a narrow horizon of everyday life, without resorting to thinking about something as useless as beauty, decoration, ornament.

In this poem, as in "A Medieval Miniature," "A Byzantine Mosaic" and "Landscape," there is a playfully ironic distanced attitude to the convention that appears between the image and the speaker as something palpable, and thus complicates full identification; an ironic duality, noticeable at the level of style. In ekphrases which refer to works from the Paleolithic period, the Byzantine Empire, the Middle Ages and the seventeenth century, the poet uses different means of language archaization and customizes the choice of vocabulary, but at the same time maintains a clear style and vocabulary of the twentieth-century point of view. The convention of the past is indeed clear and in this sense acceptable from the perspective of the primary consciousness of the subject in the poem, but it makes it impossible to approach art in the same way as in the case of "Brueghel's Two Monkeys" or "The People on the Bridge," where the sense of the poem was identical with the meaning read from the painting.

Similarly, this identifying, rather than ironic, attitude towards Rembrandt's art can be found in the poem "Pamięć nareszcie" [Memory Finally], which is not a properly *ekphrasis*, but uses elements of its poetics. The theme of the poem is a dream of dead parents, whose vision in a dream echoes the style, theme and coloring techniques of Rembrandt's portraits in interiors. The whole lyrical monologue, its reaching into memory, is inscribed in the depiction of imagined scene with the parents sitting at the table, a dreamed up image, which, however, has a strangely strong relationship with painting, since the awakening is both touching the real world and "a chiseled picture-frame."

We find *ekphrasis* in Szymborska's work not only in relation to traditional forms of high art. The poet has expanded its use to the phenomenon now appearing in the modern, technicised culture, and having a utilitarian, rather than artistic character. Such decision is characteristic for the imagination of the poet, who can creatively see poetic themes even in areas foreign to literature, such as scientific inquiry or the most common aspects of everyday life. In fact, Szymborska has applied the venerable form of *ekphrasis* to photography, and not just the purely artistic kind, but also to atelier portraits, press photography and private amateur photography.<sup>22</sup> The clearest example here is the poem "Znieruchomienie" [Frozen Motion], carefully describing the picture of Isadora Duncan standing in the atelier in an awkward, stiff

<sup>22</sup> The descriptions of photographs have already been pointed out by J. Faryno ("Semiotyczne. . .", p. 137), but he incorrectly contrasted them with descriptions of paintings and decided that the poet sees photographs as having exclusively negative value. A much more nuanced interpretation of the poems about photographs was carried out by W. Ligeza (*O poezji*... 260-269).

pose. The theme of the poem is the contrast between the mundane details of a star's everyday life (a corset) and what was the legendary about her art – the freedom and lightness of a dancer's movement.

The poem “Pierwsza fotografia Hitlera” [Hitler's First Photograph] presents a much starker contrast between the tone of a photographic image and what we know about the life of a famous person. The wording of the title meets the requirements of the poetics of *ekphrasis* exactly, as the poem contains a number of details which allow us to relate it to a specific, named object (though not one that can be defined as a work of art). The subject of the description is the first known photograph of Hitler.<sup>23</sup> The future Führer is one year old. At the bottom of the picture there is information about the photo studio: “J.F. Klinger, Braunau, Stadtgraben.”

Sh-h-h, let's not start crying, sugar.  
The camera will click from under that black hood.

The Klinger Atelier, Grabenstrasse, Braunau.  
And Braunau is a small, but worthy town — (Szyborska 269)<sup>24</sup>

The photograph is usually reproduced together with the newspaper section containing the news of the birth of Alois Hitler's son, published in the society pages of local newspaper on May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1889, so two weeks after birth. This, rather than the photograph itself, gives rise to memories of his birth:

Precious little angel, mommy's sunshine, honey bun.  
While he was being born, a year ago,  
there was no dearth of signs on the earth and in the sky: (269)

The poem parodies the mythical pattern of the narrative of the birth of a hero accompanied by extraordinary circumstances, since these “signs” are in the style of petty-bourgeois kitsch:

spring sun, geraniums in windows,  
the organ-grinder's music in the yard,  
a lucky fortune wrapped in rosy paper.  
Then just before the labor his mother's fateful dream.  
A dove seen in a dream means joyful news — (269)

Perhaps this style hides the belief in the banality of evil? The boy in the photograph is “like the tots in every other family album” (269). There is no description of his appearance in the poem. The poem is a kind of sentimental and adulatory monologue about the baby and to the baby just before having a picture taken by a photographer in a provincial town. The ironic style parodies the chattering enthusiasm, full of diminutives, and the names of baby accessories. Only in the last three lines of the

<sup>23</sup> Reproduced e.g. In K. Grünberg *Hitler prywatnie*, Toruń. Troja or in R.Ch. Brooken *Adolf Hitler. Wzlot i upadek tyrana*, trans. J. Kalinowski, Gdańsk 1994.

<sup>24</sup> Szyborska, Wisława, trans. Stanisław Barańczak, and Clare Cavanagh. *Nothing Twice: Selected Poems*. Kraków: Wydawn. Literackie, 1997. 269.

poem the voice of a hidden narrator, speaking from a different historical perspective, breaks through. This narrator is already acquainted with the little boy's future deeds and therefore can note that at the time of that picture:

No one hears howling dogs, or fate's footsteps.  
A history teacher loosens his collar  
and yawns over homework. (271)

The two discussed poems about photographs talk about the crossing of boundaries of time. This theme, which we already know Szymborska's previous ekphrases, also dominates the two descriptions of photographs from the latest volume. *Chwila* [Moment] includes two texts which already in the title indicate the subject of description: "Negatyw" [Negative] and "Fotografia z 11 września" [A photograph from September 11]. The former describes a negative image of an anonymous, private photograph of a man sitting at a table in the garden and is built on the principle of antithesis. The opposition of light and dark areas which on the negative is the reverse image of reality shows the contrast that exists between the world of the dead and the living. At the level of language the reversal is present in the modifications to fixed phrases and idiomatic expressions ("a ghost/ trying to summon the living," "offer him questions to any answer," "life/ the storm before the quiet"). The personal tone of the monologue, addressed to a close person now dead, bears similarity to that of the adjacent "Słuchawka" [Receiver] or "Pożegnanie widoku" [Parting with a View] from the volume "Koniec i początek" [The End and the Beginning], which makes us read it as an elegy.

"A photograph from September 11" describes a well-known press photograph, showing small silhouettes of people jumping from the burning tower, one of the countless images of the terrorist attack in New York. Stylistically speaking, this is not a description of an object, but a dynamic unfolding narration of what is happening. The reflection in this *ekphrasis* once again returns to the topic of time being frozen in an image. This time, however, it is not accompanied by the confident, even triumphant note known from "The Joy of Writing" or "The People on the Bridge." Instead there is horror, similar to the presentation of the last moment before the explosion of a bomb in "Terrorysta, on patrzy" [The Terrorist, He's Watching].

The characteristic feature of all of Szymborska's ekphrases is in my opinion the fact that their presentation of a selected work of art is not an end in itself, but a means to another end, which is some reflection stimulated by the original work. The descriptive element in ekphrases is always dependent on the interpretative idea which allows us to say something interesting about the problems which interest the poet also in her other works, thematically unrelated to the aesthetic qualities of any painting. These problems are mainly time, the creative power of an artist, human cruelty throughout history and different ways of understanding femininity. Ultimately, these ekphrases say more about the imagination of the poet than about the works of art they depict. However, they say it differently than in poems where the space between the poet and her readers is not occupied by any painting, sculpture of photograph serving as an intermediary.

Finally, there is one more, this time half-facetious, argument for the vital role of ekphrases in Szymborska's works. The evidence of their inspirational power is for me the fact that another author wrote a poem, an *ekphrasis*, which as in Szymborska's case is dedicated to a photograph. And as in Szymborska's poems it is not simply a description, but has been formulated as a living monologue addressed to the portrayed person. The level of detail and the accuracy of the description (it mentions the time indicated on the watch on the wrist resting next to a cup of coffee!), as well as the direct reference to the title and author of described image make it a model example of the genre. I am of course referring to the poem by Agneta Pleijel entitled "Do fotografii Wisławy Szymborskiej, wykonanej przez Joannę Helander" [To the Photograph of Wisława Szymborska taken by Joanna Helander].<sup>25</sup>

*Translation: Paweł Pyrka*

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<sup>25</sup> Polish translation by Leon Neuger along with the reproduction of Joanna Helander's photograph can be found In: *Radość czytania Szymborskiej...*, 5-6.



## Hanna MARCINIAK

### “Our monuments are ambiguous...”: On Różewicz’s Epitaphs<sup>1</sup>

Wordsworth’s “Essay upon Epitaphs,” one of the founding texts of the Romantic concept of elegiac poetry and aesthetics of the Sublime, important also for their modern varieties, reads:

And, verily, without the consciousness of a principle of immortality in the human soul, Man could never have had awakened in him the desire to live in the remembrance of his fellows... neither could the individual dying have had a desire to survive in the remembrance of his fellows, nor on their side could they have felt a wish to preserve for future times vestiges of the departed; it follows, as a final inference, that without the belief in immortality, wherein these several desires originate, neither monuments nor epitaphs, in affectionate or laudatory commemoration of the deceased, could have existed in the world. (Wordsworth 605-7)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the translation by Adam Czerniawski in: Różewicz, T. *Poezje Wybrane. Selected Poems*. Wydawnictwo Literackie: Kraków, 1994. All quotations from Joanna Trzeciak’s translation in: Różewicz, T. *Sobbing Superpower: Selected Poems of Tadeusz Różewicz*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2011. Quotations from Bill Johnston’s translation in: Różewicz, T. *New Poems*. Archipelago Books, 2007. Where English translations were unavailable, I propose my own working version of the quoted passages based on the following Polish editions of Różewicz’s work: *Utwory zebrane*, Vol. 1-12. Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, Wrocław 2003-2006; *Proza* Vol. 3 [Pr3, page number]; *Poezja* Vol. 1 [P1, page number]; *Poezja*, t. 2 [P2, page number]; *Poezja*, t. 3 [P3, page number]; *Poezja*, Vol. 4 [P4, page number]; *Matka odchodzi* [M, page number]; *Plaskorzeźba*. Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie: Wrocław, 1991. [P1, page number].

<sup>2</sup> Wordsworth, W. “Essay upon Epitaphs.” *Poetry & Prose*, selected by W.M. Merchant, Rupert Hart-Davis, London: 1955. 605-607.

The following paper is an attempt to highlight the differences between Różewicz's idea of a poetry of mourning and the model postulated by Wordsworth. Różewicz reinterprets several characteristics of the latter, such as the category of Sublime, elegiac mood of sorrow and nostalgia, poetics of prosopopeia, as well as faith in the power of poetic imagination confronted with finality. He also re-evaluates several classical funeral topoi, including the monument of poetry, the notion of eternal fame, the concept of *non omnis moriar*, consolation motifs and laudations of the departed, and the belief in the indestructibility of cultural memory. In Różewicz, the "principle of immortality in the human soul" is replaced by a reflection on the importance of remembering and the inevitability of forgetting, the indestructibility of trace, and the omnipresence of disintegration. His reflection on mortality and immortality, permanence and impermanence, presence and absence, (auto)redemptive power of poetry and the inevitability of loss is almost exemplary in its ambiguity.<sup>3</sup> His meditation on emptiness and form, and the ethical and moral dilemma of inexpressibility and non-representativeness of death are of importance, too.

Speaking of the role of memory in Różewicz's work, I am referring to both individual experience and cultural memory, the latter, in Różewicz's case, skeptical and revisionary, always aware of the painful areas of discontinuity, referencing tradition in a manner akin to Vattimo's *Verwindung*. Różewicz reaches for European topoi and myths usually to stress their semantic devaluation or ambiguity. They remain, however, a necessary and familiar cultural ground for his work. By constituting its fundamental negative reference field, tradition also becomes one of integral components of Różewicz's writing. An analogous strategy can be observed in the area of "genre memory" of elegiac literature.

Elegiac poetry, especially its variety that stems directly from the classical tradition, is one of the clearest realizations of the "strong" concept of literature understood as a signifying activity of an individual establishing for itself a permanent cultural biography and existence stored in the common memory and independent from the finiteness of biological life, the inevitability of passing and physical disintegration. The theme of "eternal fame," important for literature as defined above, in elegiac poetry takes the form of homage paid to the deceased, a praise of their virtue, their elevation and glorification. Meta-poetical reflections on the power of poetry express certainty that art can ensure immortality or at least its substitute. This is because the word, sanctioned metaphysically by its relation to Logos – the eternal and holy proto-model and a constant center – is characterized by permanence, a clear meaning and a stable, hierarchical relation between the sign and the signified.

<sup>3</sup> I understand "ambiguity" to be "a 'conjunction of mutually exclusive alternatives' in its strict, strong sense, fundamentally different from 'semantic indeterminacy' proposed by Ryszard Nycz in his discussion of the semantics of Różewicz's poetry (,Tadeusza Różewicza 'tajemnica okaleczonej poezji.' *Literatura jako trop rzeczywistości*. Universitas, Kraków: 2001. 197) "Utterance constructed in such a fashion always results in an antinomy of blanket interpretative hypotheses, leading inevitably to a kind of cognitive deadlock, a trap of irresolvable choice." (Ibid. 198.)

Two Horatian topoi: *exegi momentum* and *non omnis moriar* are constitutive for this poetry that has the power of expressing, making permanent, and eternalizing. Both of them "rely on perfection and finiteness of artistic form – in two senses of the Latin *perfectum*" (Zawadzki xviii).<sup>4</sup> They are an expression of faith in the permanence of the subject – both the poet (as in Horace's "Exegi monumentum" and "Non usitata") and the person sung about – guaranteed by the continuity of memory. Horace's "Donarem pateras," places the of poetic laudation above the commemorative value of monuments.<sup>5</sup>

In "Der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland (In Memory of Paul Celan)," Różewicz recalls Horace's *non omnis moriar* but arrives at its paradoxical opposite: "I know that I shall wholly die/ and from this flows/ the small comfort."<sup>6</sup> (SS 170) Is "existence" to be understood as homeless vegetation in a deserted "world / the gods had left"? Does existence "outside of poetry" – voluntarily giving up on poetry in favor of the truth of experience juxtaposed against literary, cultural, and eschatological myths – not rather seem a lacking condition? How is "existence" to be understood: as "that which remains" – enduring and surviving through time – or "that which continues to exist" – eternal permanence despite time, a feature of indestructibility.<sup>7</sup> Why does the thought of death as annihilation, ultimate destruction of life, bring comfort? What does it mean to "wholly die"?

<sup>4</sup> Zawadzki, A. „Koniec nowoczesności: nihilizm, hermeneutyka, sztuka.” In: Vattimo, G. *Koniec nowoczesności*. Trans. by M. Surma-Gawłowska. Introduction by A. Zawadzki. Universitas, Kraków: 2006.xviii.

<sup>5</sup> Różewicz parodies or negates Horatian themes. In *On All Fours*, he dissects the myth of the monumentalized poet-laureate, parodying the topoi of wings of poetry and poetic monument. In one of the short stories, "Róża," an exalted recitation of Kochanowski's "Hymn 24" [Pieśń XXIV] at an author's evening is juxtaposed against the distractedness and trite thoughts of the poet. In "\*\*\*\* (Kto mi związał ręce)" [Whoever tied my hands] the impossibility of poetic flight is neither grotesque, nor ironic – it is an image of a "crippled poet," cut off from the transcendental dimension of reality.

<sup>6</sup> For future reference I am quoting the discussed passage in full: "I know that I shall wholly die/ and from this flows/the small comfort// which gives me strength/ to exist outside of poetry." („Wiem że umrę cały / i stąd płynie/ ta słaba pociecha// która daje mi siłę/ trwania poza poezją.) It is important to note that the Polish verb "trwać" ("exist" in the quoted passage) also means "to remain" or "to continue to exist." [PP]

<sup>7</sup> There are two possible readings of Hölderlin's line [from "Remembrance"] „Was bleibt aber, stiften die Dichter" quoted by Różewicz in his poem titled „To jednak co trwa ustanowione jest przez poetów" [That which remains is established by the poets.] In his interpretation, G. Vattimo emphasizes enduring, as tied to the concept of monument and trace, while Heidegger stresses permanence. It would be interesting to situate Różewicz's reading in relation to these two, although due to obvious constraints doing so is impossible in this essay. See: Vattimo, G. *End of modernity* and Heidegger, M. "Holderlin and the essence of poetry." *Elucidations of Holderlin's Poetry*. Translated to Polish by S. Lisiecka. KR, Warszawa: 2004.

## Czesław Miłosz and the Polish School of Poetry

Our monuments  
are ambiguous  
they are shaped like a pit

our monuments  
are shaped  
like a tear

moles  
built our monuments  
under the earth  
our monuments  
are shaped like smoke  
they go straight to heaven

(Różewicz 1994 73)

Zbigniew Majchrowski believes the monument to be the most important motif in Różewicz's poetic imagination and astutely identifies its multiple versions and obsessive repetitiveness as an attempt at answering the question about the "shape of memory."<sup>8</sup> I would supplement the discussion of the commemorative issue in Różewicz (including remembrance, homage, memory) with the question of representation and expressibility implied by the monument (as well as the related themes of stone, sculpture, and cathedral).

A monument "shaped like a pit" is tied to the drastic image of death as falling, a characteristic of Różewicz's early poetry and stemming from the conviction of the impossibility of resurrection and ultimate decomposition of the human body stripped of the sacral dimension of corporeality. An oneiric vision of a grave that no longer signifies the passage from the carnality of earthly existence towards eternal life of the soul returns also in one of his later poems "\*\*\*\* (wicher dobijał się do okien)" [wind battered the windows]. Monument "shaped like smoke" sends us to "Masacre of the Boys" and "\*\*\*\* (Einst hab ich die Muse gefragt...)" where the tree loses its symbolic value of a cultural topos, transformed into "a tree of black smoke," a "dead tree/ with no star in its crown." (Różewicz 1994 21) These appear to be two variations of a "counter-monument" which through its (non)existence touches the problem of visual representation of liminal experience and the monumentalization of memory.<sup>9</sup> Różewicz seems to be aware of the fact that once memory is assigned the form of monument, we relieve ourselves, to an extent, of the duty to remember.

<sup>10</sup> His "ambiguous" monuments neither elevate (also in the "spatial" meaning of

<sup>8</sup> Majchrowski, Z. „Pomniki w życiu i twórczości Tadeusza Różewicza.[Monuments in Różewicz's life and work]" Presentation at „Przekraczanie Granic" conference, Wrocław 27-30 March 2006. Post-conference volume [in print].

<sup>9</sup> *Counter-monument* is a form of monument to the memory of Shoah victims that negates and destroys itself, disappearing with time, leaving an empty space and lasting only in the living human memory.

<sup>10</sup> See: Leoni, G. "The First Blow": Projects from the Camp at Fossoli." *Holocaust Remembrance. The Shapes of Memory*. G. Hartman (ed.) Blackwell, Oxford, UK–Cambridge, Mass: 1994.

the word), nor eternalize, as they are easily annihilated themselves in the process of organic decomposition, their feeble condition and shapelessness a testimony to universal destructibility.<sup>11</sup>

Różewicz's "Preparations for a Poetry Reading," both volumes of *Dzienniki* [Diaries] and all of his books of poetry contain an elegiac cycle which expands continuously through addition of new poems devoted to the memory of close and distant friends, mostly poets, writers and critics as well as important artists unknown in person. Two commemorative volumes: *Our Elder Brother* and *Mother Departs* have a special status among his writing. I would like to devote my attention to these two works in particular, their obituaries, epitaphs, meditations and commemorations, and to the concepts of "the other side," memory and poetry inscribed in them.

Memory in Różewicz is an ambiguous force. On the one hand, it is a kind of moral obligation, as it establishes the identity of man, community and culture, even when it is the "acute" kind of memory, one testifying to loss and "unattainable wholeness" rather than completeness of any kind (Kunz 225).<sup>12</sup> In fact, rejecting the illusion of repair, the poet seems to valorize negative experiences that brand with ineradicable trauma. His reference to Hölderlin's hymnal "Remembrance" [Andenken] (in "To jednak co trwa" [That which remains]), where Hölderlin points to the special role of the poet as the agent "establishing" reality and ensuring its endurance through remembrance and commemoration seems of importance in this context.

On the other hand, the imperative to remember becomes a curse to the living and appears as a force oppressive to the body, threatening the psychological and physical integrality of the Self. Eventually, it transforms into a sense of guilt, betrayal and denial of the deceased. This ambivalence accompanies the poet from the earliest verses in *Anxiety* and *Red Glove* (see: "Mask" and "To the Dead") to his "late" work:<sup>13</sup> "I poet – shepherd of life/ have become shepherd of the dead/ I have labored too long on the pastures/ of your cemeteries Depart now/ you dead leave me/ in peace// this is a matter for the living" (Różewicz 2007 72-73).

<sup>11</sup> The theme of "poet as a mole," an antithesis of "poet as a bird" complements the discussed phenomenon. It evokes the value-giving spatial associations with solarity, lightness, exaltation, and purity – the "mole poet" is oriented at the earthly, heavy, low, and dirty. The mole as a meta-poetic theme appears in Różewicz paired with a reflection on old age and death (in "Teraz") or re-evaluation of his work and maturation into silence („To jednak co trwa... [That which remains...]). It is also significant that the motifs of monument as a "black mound" of soil („czarny kopczyk"), and the "poet as a mole" return also in the commemorative "Elegia (pamięci Cz. M.)" [Elegy. To the memory of Cz. M.]

<sup>12</sup> Kunz, T. *Strategie negatywne w poezji Tadeusza Różewicza. Od poetyki tekstu do poetyki lektury*, Universitas: Kraków. 2005. 225.

<sup>13</sup> In his essay titled "Wounded Poet." (To the memory of M. Jastrun) Różewicz writes: "I often tell myself: stop that! Stop writing epitaphs. Run away from this growing cemetery. But then I recall Jastrun's words: 'If you still remember, write it down... may not everything be lost in this country.' And I sit down to my 'craft,' rebellious and angry, I begin to move my hand with a pen across paper." (Pr3, 386)

For the dead, being “locked inside memory” entails an almost physical, compulsory connection to life; it entails impossibility to depart and dissolve into nothingness, necessity to remain in the liminal, ontologically unstable emptiness filled with traces: “The dead inhabit my life. They start to live rich lives in the landscape of my memory...Am I to write the book of the dead? Is it not better to bury [them] and leave towards future?” („Tożsamość (wspomnienie o Karolu Kuryluku),” Pr3 78-79). At this point we have arrived, I believe, at a fundamental contradiction governing Różewicz’s complicated vision of “the beyond” and his ambiguous concept of mourning. On the one hand, “writing a memory about the Dead is almost always a fight against time and death for me. It’s an attempt to summon the Dead... To raise the Dead with the word. To turn him back, tear him away from the land of the Dead... Do they live only as long as their image does in our memory? A perceptible and corporeal image.” (Zamknięcie” Pr3 95-97) On the other hand: “I recall the dead more and more often, even though I am reluctant to write about them. I wanted to bury them and bid them farewell in poetry.” („Tożsamość” Pr3, 78).

Różewicz is aware of the inconclusive character of his eschatological and meta-poetical reflection: “When I write, I pile up contradictions. And this is all I can offer him.” (Pr, 12) he says in one of the essays, “Zostanie po mnie pusty pokój” [An Empty Room Will Be What’s Left Of Me], to the memory of Leopold Staff. The self-contradictory vision of “the other side” emerging from his commemorative and elegiac work reveals itself, as Maria Janion astutely observes, already on the level of language, in a specific construction of phrase that “foreshadows a declaration of faith and concludes as a declaration of lack of faith” (Janion 151).<sup>14</sup>

Now as I write these words Mother’s eyes, peaceful and watchful rest upon me.  
She looks at me from “the other world” the others side which I don’t believe in  
(*Teraz [Now]*, M, 10).

For a few months now  
my Friend  
Kornel Filipowicz  
has been in the otherworld  
while I continue in this one

I do not believe in the afterlife  
so I am trying to understand  
your crossing the threshold  
into the otherworld

“Conversation with a Friend” (Różewicz 2011 171)

I would like to let this paradox resound fully, emphasize that Różewicz’s poetry of mourning situates itself somewhere in-between “I do not believe” and “I am trying to understand.” I do not think it necessary to try and arrive at all costs at a single conclusion and impose a definite interpretation onto all those contradictions. One

<sup>14</sup> Janion, M. „To co trwa.” *Twórczość* 2000 Vol. 5. 151.

should rather accept both poles of Różewicz's antitheses and attempt to articulate the nuances of this ungraspable and notoriously ambiguous thanatological conception.

Różewicz's contradictions seem derive from his reflection on the "expiring of the Absolute" ["Wygasanie Absolutu"] that brings about the fatal erosion of language and poetry. He "writes continuously about the death of poetry, which corresponds to writing about the death of God; he seems to find an analogy between poetry and God" (195).<sup>15</sup> His elegiac reflection oscillates between the word and the body; by incorporating what seems impossible to coexist, it places equation marks between biology, psychology, and semiotics. It moves fluidly between different "dimensions of death": from the literal, biological death, dying off and decomposition of matter, through the death of the soul and memory, word and art, to the disappearance of *sacrum*.

A fundamental question Różewicz seems to be asking is as follows: can poetry that "is dead...that is mortal" (Pr3, 163) save anything in any way or make anything permanent? How can the word, devoid of its metaphysical foundation, impermanent and helpless against disintegration, eternalize and ensure immortality? Perhaps the word is only a trace reminding of loss, a space where that which is absent resounds and seeks shelter? If so, the only function of poetry of mourning would be serving as a hardly consolable "vigil of death," a defense of its irreducibility and incomprehensibility, "chasing shadows that run away into nothingness or guarding the empty space marked by those shadows" (Rewers 311; Żukowski 69).<sup>16</sup>

How to write in a dying language about the dying of man? If the writing of elegiac poetry is doomed to failure (in the sense of the impossibility of "raising the Dead with the word"), does it inevitably entail an even more painful failure of "adding one death to another...the experience of double death?" (Skrendo 150).<sup>17</sup>

How does one invent a language and manner of representation which would ensure not a form of immortality to man inasmuch as they would save the fact of death from aesthetization and fetishization by its becoming a literary "topos" or "theme." It would have to be poetry that, paradoxically, ensures immortality to death itself as an event that is unimaginable and inexpressible, an event that cannot be easily assimilated in the formal order of the cultural organization of experience. It would have to be language as something more than a continuation of the deadly annihilation by representation. The question of appropriateness, of the right to cross an unspeakable line with the use of word and image, of entanglement in conventions that figure and aestheticize the originally amorphous and asemantic inhuman reality, lies at the crux of Różewicz's funeral poetry.

Among the most moving moments of "Dziennik gliwicki," [Gliwice diaries] some passages of which were included in *Mother Departs*, there is a scene where the poet-

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. „Nadmiar bólu.” *Żyjąc tracimy życie. Niepokojące tematy egzystencji*. W.A.B., Warszawa: 2001. 195.

<sup>16</sup> Rewers, E. „Pustka i forma” *Teksty Drugie* 2002 Vol. 2/3. 311. Żukowski, T. „Non omnis moriar?” *Res Publica Nowa*. 2000 Vol. 5. 69.

<sup>17</sup> Skrendo, A. *Tadeusz Różewicz i granice literatury. Poetyka i etyka transgresji*, Universitas, Kraków: 2002. 150.

son reads poetry to the dying woman. "I wanted to read a few poems to the Mother, but she falls asleep; she is weakened. The poems sounded so strange anyway, so distant" (M, 108). There is something fundamentally inappropriate, even cruel, in it, something that the poet himself is well aware of. The thought of the unacceptable incompatibility of art to suffering and a sense of guilt caused by the "dry eyes of the poet" who imperturbably continues to polish the form of his "lamentations" is one of the most important, most recurrent topics of the volume. The scene returns in another poem "\*\*\*\* (Ukryłem twarz w dłoniach)" [I hid my face in my hands] to the memory of Helmut Kajzar: "I brought him a poem/ I read and voice failed me/ he died/ and I have lived for 22310 days already/ twenty two thousand/ three hundred and ten" (P3 205).

The aporetic vision of "the other side" and the border between the world of the living and the world of the dead is another fundamental problem in Różewicz's work. In his poetic sketch, "Znałem boga poezji" [I knew the god of poetry], a part of "Zostanie po mnie pusty pokój" [An Empty Room Will Be What's Left Of Me], "the other side" is presented as the deepest, stony silence, as the great Nothing. Similarly, in "A Conversation With A Friend" or "Kartki wydarte z dziennika" [Pages torn from a journal]: "More and more of them pass to the 'other side,' And then, great calm will come. Nothing. Neither salvation, nor damnation or Last Judgment, neither hell nor heaven, nor transmigration of souls. The great Nothing that day after day is coming to me." (Pr3, 350)

Różewicz's "Nothing" is sometimes "constructive and affirmative...dynamic and active" („Nic, czyli wszystko" [Nothing, in other words, everything] (Pr3, 183)), a false substitute of dying reality that fills the ontological void. On the other hand, his "Nothing" is always a lack. It is always a "space left behind" („Zamek na lodzie. (Notatka z lutego 1962 roku)" [Castle built on ice. A note from Feb. 1962] (Pr3 174)).<sup>18</sup> Trauma, a sense of "hollowness" and "acute memory" of the poet defending emptiness as emptiness, rejecting easy consolation and hasty restitution of degraded values, are a response to the acute "lack of reality," to the absence of ground and vertical dimension of the world (Kunz 225; Skrendo 118).<sup>19</sup> A wound healing too quickly and forgetting about the loss would be the essence of ethical nihilism.

And "Nothing" after death reveals itself as an empty space of silence and stillness, as in the poem "Doors" in which: "in the illuminated landscape/ a third door/ opens/ and beyond it in a mist/ towards the back/ a little to the left/ or in

<sup>18</sup> It is an essay of special importance for Różewicz's reflection on the cultural and moral crisis of modernity and parallel inventiveness in the search for adequate forms of representation for inexpressible and irrepresentable experiences. A meditation on the liminal status of emptiness (between being and non-being) returns in the poem "Bocca della Verita" and in "Kartki wydarte z 'dziennika gliwickiego'" [Pages torn from Gliwice diary]: "External world, nature; all of it surrounds interior that is empty. But this emptiness has a form – it appears as hunger, thirst, waiting. Is there a food that will finally feed the hunger of contemporary man?" (Pr3, 317)

<sup>19</sup> Kunz, T. *Strategie negatywne...* 225. Skrendo, A. „Niewczesna poezja Różewicza." *Kwartalnik Artystyczny* 2006 Vol. 2. 118.



the centr/ I see / Nothing" (M 63). Considering the context of *Mother Departs* and its eschatological vision, it seems particularly important that the poem, which has four versions and alternate endings, was rewritten again and given a different one (Skrendo 198-9).<sup>20</sup> A clearer separation and substantiation of "Nothing" achieved through new delimitation of text, the emphasis of capitalization combined with the unusual use of a single negative in a syntactically affirmative sentence, transform the last two stanzas (so far a testimony to a "thwarted act of seeing") into "an account of it, an account of a remarkable vision" of something that is not / does not exist (Skrendo 138).<sup>21</sup>

Eponymous doors is one of Różewicz's figures of passage. The themes of bridge, gate (the poem "brama") or gates, as in the moving "The Gates of Death (to the memory of Henryk Bereska)" are also inscribed in this symbolic of transition. These figures are usually negated, however, devoid of symbolic meaning as a result of loss of a connection to the ritual. Transition no longer entails a change of ontological status of the person experiencing it, nor does it entail access to the transcendental dimension, to something radically different. A "spatial passage" does not become a "spiritual passage."<sup>22</sup> The Gates of Death in the title do not designate a clearly defined and reliably localized ontological border. It turns out that life itself is a ceaseless, painful squeezing through the invisible door, as death is its immanent part:

The gates of death  
The secret of their construction  
is that the gates are not there  
an at the same time they are  
wide open to all  
they are so narrow  
that they must be squeezed through  
in the sweat of one's brow  
in bloody labor  
for years on end squealing  
or screaming in fear

(Różewicz 2011 253)

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 198-199. The version printed in [P2] is the one we know from *Face*: „trochę w lewo / albo w środku // nic / nie widzę” (P2 324) [emphasis mine, PP], semantically most divergent from the version in *Mother departs*. [Due to syntactical differences between English and Polish, translation proposed by Czerniawski (Różewicz 1994 145) “a little to the left / or in the centre// I see/ nothing” erases some of the syntactical oddity mentioned by the author further in the essay. In this particular case “I don’t see/ anything” appears to be closer translation of the version in *Faces*. Paradoxically “I see/ nothing” when translated literally to Polish results in “Widzę / Nic,” the syntactically unusual construction discussed above. PP]

<sup>21</sup> Skrendo, A. *Tadeusz Różewicz*... . 138.

<sup>22</sup> See: A. van Gennep *Obrzędy przejścia. Systematyczne studium ceremonii*. [The Rites of Passage] Translated by B. Biały, introduction J. Tokarska-Bakir, PIW, Warszawa: 2006, especially chapter: “Przejście fizyczne” [The Territorial Passage].

Of the two poetics of funeral texts distinguished by Antonina Lubaszewska, those written “against the death of the text” or for the “death of the text,” I am particularly interested in the latter strategy (Lubaszewska 588, 586, 577).<sup>23</sup> I understand the “death of the text” here as a process in which the text becomes an equivalent to lethal “process of disappearance.” The purpose of writing is, paradoxically, the pursuit of “absolute visual silence,” hence the elimination of the verb (means of dynamizing the work), nullification of metaphor, fragmentation, silences and evasions. In order to “narrate death through the great Nothing of the text,” it is reduced to white space, a blank sheet of paper (Lubaszewska 581, 580, 579). An image of death becomes the death of an image, as in the poem \*\*\* In memory of Konstanty Puzyna.<sup>24</sup> Spaces between the lines here acquire in this case the same semantic status as actual the lines, and even begin to dominate; the gradual reduction of the lexicon leads to a tautology, a complete decay of language and meaning: “so that’s/ all/ mummy// yes sonny/ that’s all/ and nothing more/ nothing more/ so that’s all of life/ yes that’s all” (Różewicz 1994 257). “The death of the text” in Różewicz’s funeral poems seems to correspond to a specific way of experiencing death as dissolution, “crumbling,” erosion.

“Death in the text” on the other hand is not so much a “subject” or “theme” of the work, but rather a kind of internalized, though inexpressible and directly unrepresentable, though inscribed in the text, silence, absence, or lack. Although death is pure negativity and indeterminacy, a “death of experience and the impossibility of an image,” it can be captured only in the form of substantiated and concretized representations. It turns out, however, to be “the most empty image, since the obstacle which separates us from its subject is impossible to overcome,”<sup>25</sup> the most definite obstacle of all. Death is therefore always represented by “something else,” and the verbal or visual substitute surrounds the inner void, because “the thought of death is outside, that is, it cannot be taken by death itself” (Lubaszewska 579).<sup>26</sup> What is significant, Różewicz rarely refers to its personifying figures, the most traditional of thanatic symbols, which “anthropomorphize that which is non-human” (Mikołajko

<sup>23</sup> Poetics, in which “death in the text is against the death of the texts,” in the case of texts dedicated to late writers and poets, is realized as dynamization and internal dialogization of the text by use of quotations, allusions and paraphrases of their works. Its goal is to “complement the work of the deceased,” as it becomes not only an expression of mourning, but also an attempt to keep alive the memory and the “interpretation of one’s way of existence, the existence through one’s work” (A. Lubaszewska, *Śmierć w tekście – przeciw śmierci tekstu*, „Ruch Literacki” 1996 Vol. 5, 588, 586, 577.)

<sup>24</sup> In this case the disappearance is literal: when we compare the manuscript to the printed work we can observe consistent reduction of forms of expression and proliferation of the whiteness of the blank page. Cf. Pl. 18-19.

<sup>25</sup> Lefebvre, M.- J. *L’image fascinante et le surréel*. qtd. in M. Guiomar. *Zasady estetyki śmierci* (transl. T. Swoboda). *Wymiary śmierci*, ed. S. Rosiek. słowo/obraz terytoria: Gdańsk. 2002. 82.

<sup>26</sup> Lubaszewska, A. *Śmierć w tekście – przeciw śmierci tekstu*, „Ruch Literacki” 1996 Vol. 5. 579

51).<sup>27</sup> Driven by the "imperative to express pure negativity," the author of *Monuments* creates forms which are rather inverted, hollow, double-negated (Kunz 117).<sup>28</sup> One such "negative strategy" of representation seems to be the theme of the "silent seed" and the "inner poem."

Dying of loved ones is thus experienced by the poet as a depletion of existence, the ontic weakening of reality. The posthumous "Nothing" is a penetrating force, breaking up existence from the inside: "The space where I live is diminished not only by the passing of the years of my life, but also by the faces of those who leave. At first going away slowly, reluctantly, one at a time, then faster, more numerous, almost en masse. Sometimes it seems to me that I'm floating on an ice floe. Its surface cracks, becomes ever smaller" ("Identity (memory of Karol Kuryluk)," Pr3 78). This experience translates into the use of "narrative archetype of death," "one of the anthropological structures of imagination, constituted by the image of breaking, tearing...extraction, separation, farewell, departure, disappearance, transitions, distance ...." In this way, death as a theme begins to appear to be "one of the semiotic-narrative structures," involving the collapse of syntactic and logical coherence of the text by means of disjunction of the relation between "subject P and an object O that is life" (Lubaszewska 577-8).<sup>29</sup> Its equivalent on the level of poetic imaging become the themes are loss, degradation and erosion: "I feel tired. Constantly crumbling. Something is crumbling, collapsing." (M 99) notes Różewicz in *Dziennik gliwicki* [Gliwice diary], written during the illness and death of his mother. Similarly in "That Rustle...":

<sup>27</sup> Mikolejko, Z. „Kilka słów u umarłej” in *Śmierć i tekst. Sytuacja ostateczna w perspektywie słowa. słowo/obraz terytoria*: Gdańsk. 2001. 51. Of particular significance here is the poem "Der Tod ist ein Meister ..." in which death is personified in a double fashion: as a "female" ("beautiful Stranger") and a "male" ("ein Meister") figure. *La mort*, Celan's suicidal death in the waters of the Seine is a personification of death which does not deprive one of their face and name, nor strips the intimate encounter of its mystery. The poet refers to the phantasm of the Great Mother in the metonymic phrase: "open womb / of river / death's oblivion" (P3 271). *Der Tod*, on the other hand, means the dehumanized mass extermination in death camps. The unrepresentable taboo of the Shoah is only suggested by the allegory of the "master from Germany" from Celan's *Todesfuge* (which is a dual mediatization emphasizing the impossibility of direct representation). According to Jean-Luc Nancy, the Holocaust is the event in the history of the West and its culture, after which a figural representation of death from the perspective of life, one understood as *hypotyposis*, total and self-absorbed "presence made present," is no longer possible. "Death, as inappropriate property of existence, which is called finite in the sense of fullness, in its unity and integrity or indispensability, in its being-in-the-world, was 'stolen'... As a result one cannot come into the story of life for which it would provide access, i.e. entry and exit, an opening" See also *Zakazana reprezentacja*, (trans. A. Dziadek), "Teksty Drugie" 2004. Vol. 5.

<sup>28</sup> Kunz, T. *Strategie negatywne...* 117.

<sup>29</sup> Lubaszewska, A. *Śmierć w tekście – przeciw śmierci tekstu*, „Ruch Literacki” 1996 Vol. 5. 579, 577-578.

That rustle  
life pouring  
from a world full of objects  
into death  
it's through me  
like a hole  
in reality  
this world pushes through  
into the next

(SP 237)

“Nothing” is no longer a radical antithesis of “something,” it seems rather a destructive force, ever present within reality. There is a continuous osmosis between the two, “death is no longer a limit which crowns a busy life; death is an internal vacuum, which dilutes the density of becoming, a meontic component diminishing the ontic substance of life” (Jankélévitch 344-5).<sup>30</sup> Life is thus still present in the posthumous void – as a trace.

At this point, I should clarify the categories of form and emptiness which are used here. I define form, following Ewa Rewers’ understanding, as “contribution of the mind to the object of study. Thanks to form, a mind can perceive and comprehend an experience in a unique and specific way. Experience is thus the opposite of form understood as such” (Rewers 309).<sup>31</sup> As emptiness I understand something ontologically indeterminate, a liminal space between being and not being. I refer to Plato, who defined this space as “admitting not of destruction,” an undifferentiated ground “providing a seat for all that has birth,” which “should be outside of all forms” (Plato 82, 84).<sup>32</sup> Thus understood, emptiness is amorphous and invisible, and as a consequence, unimaginable and inexpressible. Emmanuel Levinas seems to refer to this tradition of thought when he writes:

Let us imagine all things, beings and persons, returning to nothingness.” What remains after this imaginary destruction of everything is not something, but the fact that there is [il y a].” The absence of everything returns as a presence, as the place where the bottom has dropped out of everything, an atmospheric density, a plenitude of the void, or the murmur of silence. There is, after this destruction of things and beings, the impersonal “field of forces” of existing...Existing returns no matter with what negation one dismisses it. There is, as the irremissibility of pure existing.

(Levinas 46-7)<sup>33</sup>

Levinas considers the possibility of “being without nothingness, which leaves no hole and permits no escape,” when death refers to loss of corporeality and subjec-

<sup>30</sup> Jankélévitch, V. “Quoddité” jest niezniszczalna. Nieodwołalność nieodwracalności.” (trans. M. Jastrzębiec-Mosakowski). *Wymiary śmierci*. 344-345.

<sup>31</sup> Rewers, E. *Pustka i forma*... 309.

<sup>32</sup> Plato, and Peter Kalkavage. *Plato's Timaeus: Translation, Glossary, Appendices and Introductory Essay*. Newburyport, MA: Focus Pub./R. Pullins, 2001. 82, 84/

<sup>33</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel. *Time and the Other and Additional Essays*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne UP, 1987. 46-47.

tivity, dissolution in pure, undifferentiated existence, but it cannot be a complete annihilation of being (Lévinas 50).

"Nothing" does not mean nothingness then, but rather the empty "space left after something," a loss, "an acute trace of absence" which, "like a stigma, or a chronic wound, continuously focuses attention and leaves long-term effects – paradoxically proving the persistence of being of that which does not exist," which is past and is no longer perceptible in ordinary experience, but remains surprisingly indestructible (Nycz 107).<sup>34</sup> The dead are paradoxically present as an absence, persist in the language of the living, but as silence, in memory – as silent faces. Their ontological status is impossible to define, they cannot be said to exist, but simultaneously one cannot determine their irreversible disappearance. The "Shadow" that appears in the poem "\*\*\*" (I waded through the dream...), exists neither in a dream nor the waking world, it is "something" in many ways unstable, something located on the border – or perhaps even itself being the border, the name for its experience...it is like a trace of being impressed on non-being, a circle on the surface of nothingness" (Skrendo 151).<sup>35</sup> "Nothing" as "space left after something" retains the remnant of "something":

an empty room

empty?  
but I am in it

I am I write  
I listen to the silence

on the pillow the hollow  
left by your head  
being filled  
being smoother  
by time

(Różewicz 2011 187)

According to Lévinas a trace is something outside the order of reality, something which disrupts its temporal and ontological homogeneity. "He who left traces in wiping out his traces did not mean to say or do anything by the traces he left. He disturbed the order in an irreparable way. He has passed absolutely" (Lévinas 104).<sup>36</sup> Blind and unreadable trace is neither a sign (*semion*), a cipher left to decode, nor a clear material impression material (*typos*) of the source entity. It is rather and indelible, but hardly identifiable remnant (*ichnos*), in which absence gains an advantage

<sup>34</sup> Nycz, R. „Tajemnica okaleczonej poezji. Trzy głosy do twórczości Tadeusza Różewicza.” In: *Zobaczyć poetę*, ed. E. Guderian-Czaplińska, E. Kalemba-Kasprzak, WiS, Poznań: 1993. 107.

<sup>35</sup> Skrendo, A. *Tadeusz Różewicz*... 151.

<sup>36</sup> Lévinas, Emmanuel. *Collected Philosophical Papers of Emmanuel Levinas ; Translated by Alphonso Lingis*. Dordrecht, Netherlands: M. Nijhoff, 1986. 104.

over presence. A trace of being is “something indestructible,” which remains after existence and what death cannot completely erase (Jankélévitch 352).<sup>37</sup>

Death destroys the whole of a living being, but it cannot destroy the fact that they lived; death turns to ashes and dust the psychosomatic human architecture, but *quoddité* of lived life still exists in these ruins; everything that belongs to the nature of being is perishable, that is it exposes this being in different ways to decay, dissolution, decomposition; only this invisible, intangible, simple and metaphysical *je-ne-sais-quoi* that we call *quoddité*, escapes annihilation.

(Jankélévitch 352)

These traces, when embedded in the memory and consciousness of the living, transform their mental space into posthumous space, where the dead not so much persist as static, reified images, but actually “live.” They are granted the attributes of presence and vitality: “The dead are still with me. I see them alive. They perform a gesture, their faces...They are as present as the living. But my ties with them are somehow stronger than with the living. Death. Locked in my memory” (Pages torn from “Gliwice diary,” Pr3, 317).

Despite being an inalienable part of the world of the living, the dead are silent. They are able to perform movements and gestures, their faces are clear and able to express, but the “life” they lead in the space of memory is a silent life. Communication with them is always an illusory communication, a monologue or prosopopoeia: “I sit on the bench, and talk to Staff and Przyboś. The dead are silent, and I tell them what has happened to me since they left...Staff is smiling...I remember that smile, youthful, “roguish” even. I remember that smile.” (Tale of Staff, Tuwim and the Roses... Pr3, p 52-53).

In Różewicz’s poetry the concepts of non-being and diminishing as internalized and indelibly present components of existence are also illustrated by the theme of “silent seed”: “Oh how it sprouts and grows in me/ the silent seed/ of dead fruit/ rises to the light/ punctures the blind clay/ of my body/ breaks wooden tongue” (P1 364). It is a shocking image of a living human body becoming a tomb; one of Różewicz’s visions of “afterlife”: “my mother was walking towards me/ Don’t be afraid, I said, you are in the ground/ no one can harm you, hurt you, touch you...you are in me no one can touch you/ humiliate you hurt you” (M, 69, emphasis mine – H.M.).

As an interiorized “empty signifier functioning without phenomenal subject...a presence, which refers to the absence,” the dead exist in the body and the consciousness of man, disintegrating them by placing them on the border between life and death (Thomas 43).<sup>38</sup> They are the source of excruciating memory, painful like a thorn: “I am the pit full of memories/ one on top of another” (P1 280), “I house the dead/ it is where they found/ the last refuge” (P2 209). Death is an integral part

<sup>37</sup> Jankélévitch, V. “Quoddité” jest niezniszczalna. Nieodwołalność nieodwracalności.” (trans. M. Jastrzębiec-Mosakowski). *Wymiary śmierci*. 352.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas, Louis-Vincent. *Trup. Od biologii do antropologii*. Wydawnictwo Łódzkie: Łódź. 1991. 43.

of life, indispensable emptiness inside the fullness: "death in the living me/ dug corridors/ screaming inside me/ like an abandoned cave/ full of bones" (P3 244). The textual equivalent of internalized lack is the speech "broken and marked by the wound of silence" hiding the unspeakable: "When the light falls/ on my poem/ I see death in it/ a black grain/ of ergot/ in a golden head of wheat/ which drifts off/ beyond the horizon" (Żukowski 150; Różewicz 2011 162).<sup>39</sup>

The "silent grain" is also a silent "inner poem," the proper core of poetry, hidden beneath the words of "external" poem<sup>40</sup>. This motif, obsessively recurring in Różewicz's writing starting from "Posłowie do poematu" [Afterword to the poem] finds its most compelling articulation in a series of paradoxical "unwritten" poems about the "implosion of poetry,"<sup>41</sup> such as: "\*\*\*" ("I tried to remember..."), "A Poem" ("I wanted to describe..."), "\*\*\*" ("poetry doesn't always..."), "now." They are the records of aporetic gestures of placing and (simultaneously) removing the mark, word-traces of the dissolution of words. "Afterword to the poem," a metapoetic appendix to the poem "Na powierzchni i w środku" [On the surface and inside], is a development of the poem originally sketched in the essay *Zamknięcie* [Closure], dedicated to the memory of Zdzisław Hierowski:

There are  
inner poems  
and outer poems  
there are poems  
tangible full sensual  
which enfold the others  
secret and empty  
like peel and pulp  
enfolding and hiding  
the seed  
the grain  
"Closure" (Pr3, 97)

Slow and careful  
you must take off the words  
strip image of image  
strip shapes of colors  
images of feelings  
to the core  
to the language of suffering  
to death

"Afterword to the poem" (P3 108-109)

In the commentary to the sketch Różewicz ponders how "to bring out from the depths and to the surface" the silent, hidden "inner poem." The act of uncovering

<sup>39</sup> Żukowski, T. „Zagłada a język poetycki Tadeusza Różewicza.” In: *Literatura polska wobec Zagłady*, ed. A. Brodzka-Wald, D. Krawczyńska, J. Leociak, ŻiH: Warszawa 2000. 150.

<sup>40</sup> This difference is crucial to the poet. See "Afterword..."

<sup>41</sup> *O implozji poezji*, A. Czerniawski's conversation with T. Różewicz, „Poezja” 1989. Vol. 2. 10.

is an experience of crippling tear, almost physical disintegration, when that which is “secret and empty” and absolutely negative, “rips off the coating of realized poem and comes out into the light with blood and water” (Pr3, 98). The inexpressible “core” of the text is compared to the elusive (non)presence of the dead in the memories of the living: “This is how the dead hide behind my memories and how Zdzisław is hiding behind these words. I cannot reveal him. He is there, behind a thick curtain, behind the veil. I can not reveal it, because I know that he is not there, that I will not find him” (Pr3, 98). In this instance, death is an impassable barrier to life; it makes it impossible to journey to the world of the dead, whether through memory of imagination, and to express what is not in the language of what is.

The core of poetry, the “actual tragedy unfolding inside the poem” (Pr3, 152) turns out to be the tragic inability to express – in terms of presence and the language of life experience – the non-experience of an event “not meant”<sup>42</sup> for a living person (Cichowicz 8). Poetry ‘about’ death cannot present any experience, because “that which ‘begets’ the poem...is precisely what hasn’t taken place, occurred, nor happened in the individual event, to which the poem refers, without describing it” (Lacoue-Labarthe 28).<sup>43</sup> Death, “ostentatious, yet incomprehensible, transparent, but unreadable, complete, and at the same time representing absence, belongs to non-verbal events” (Czpliński 9),<sup>44</sup> and thus cannot adequately made present in the language. It is the destruction and deprivation of language, a vulnerability in discourse, “a monosyllable, unpronounceable, which can’t be named or confessed.”<sup>45</sup>

In “Gliwice diary” the poet helplessly watches as his mother’s dying becomes the process of losing the language, a gradual deprivation of the semiotic universe. Words are used only to communicate (?) physical pain, while thought and language are reduced “to the language of suffering/ to death.”

Mother speaks less and less, says fewer words, as if she were losing them. Sometimes she mutters, mumbles especially after waking up. Most frequently repeated words are: “air, water, burns, hurts.” She communicates with looks and signs...The baby’s gibberish will be shaped into the words of life – the babble of those going away is a diminishing, decay and dissolution of words, leading to the final silence. (M 107).

Can something that has death as its constitutive meontic “core” be a salvation from death? The poetic word is a mortal word, not only due to the lack of a sacred archetype, but also because it “designates” death and, as such, is the lack of words. And yet, the omnipotent mortality, while leading to the erosion of language and paralysis

<sup>42</sup> Cichowicz. S. *Śmierć: gwałt na idei lub reakcja życia. Wstęp Antropologia śmierci. Myśl francuska*, trans. S. Cichowicz, J.M. Godzimirski. PIW: Warszawa 1993. 8.

<sup>43</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe. P. *Poetry as Experience*, trans. A. Tarnowski. Stanford University Press: Stanford Cal. 2004. 23.

<sup>44</sup> Czaplinski. P. *Szczeliny śmierci. Mikrologi ze śmiercią. Motywy tanatyczne we współczesnej literaturze polskiej*, „Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne. Seria Literaturoznawcza”: 2001. 9.

<sup>45</sup> Ariès. P. „Śmierć odwrócona.” trans. J. M. Godzimirski, In: *Antropologia śmierci...* . 243.



of imagination, at the same time "*stimulates the evolution of consciousness* of the subject. Paradoxically, therefore, it can be said that Różewicz's poetry grows, continues – thanks to obsession with dying. Death keeps this poetry alive" (Legeżyńska 129).<sup>46</sup>

Understood both literally and metaphorically, the multi-dimensional experience of death becomes the archetype of the poet's various experiences of liminality. Conversely, the liminal experience is in Różewicz's poetic anthropology usually an experience of death, and more precisely, a traumatic "experience of disintegration – dissolution of matter, annihilation of "real" reality, destruction and scattering of meaning" (Nycz 200).<sup>47</sup> At the same time, however, the death is to the poet a paradigmatic and fundamental experience of "the prior, and only reality" (Stankowska 122).<sup>48</sup> In a degraded and aesthetically anesthetized world where not only the value of experience, but its very category has disappeared,<sup>49</sup> and where death was rejected and made meaningless because it "is only the negation life and cannot be accompanied by anything more than an empty denial of life" (Barański 45),<sup>50</sup> the experience of universal mortality and inevitable disappearance may become the only form of authentic experience of reality.<sup>51</sup>

The unusual frequency of imagery associated with stone, sculptures and monuments is typical of Różewicz's funeral texts, as he often compared writing of funeral poetry to putting up tombstones, engraving epitaphs, or carving cemetery monuments. In "Closure" he writes: "The graveyard of poems is growing, poetic tombstones for the dead. They grow next to one another like fresh graves" (Pr3, 96). In "...Zraniony poeta" [...Wounded poet], memories of the dead are called "tombstone inscriptions." "I have buried too many loved ones, friends and acquaintances, too many enemies... Memories as grave stones rest on my mind, my emotions," he says (Pr3, 386).

<sup>46</sup> Legeżyńska, A. „Gest pożegnania. Szkice o poetyckiej świadomości elegijno-ironicznej,” „Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne. Seria Literaturoznawcza” 1999. 129.

<sup>47</sup> Nycz, R. „Tadeusza Różewicza....” 200.

<sup>48</sup> Stankowska, A. „Inne stany arcyepoezji” *Kwartalnik Artystyczny*. 2006 Vol. 2. 122.

<sup>49</sup> Tokarska-Bakir, J. „Zanik doświadczenia: diagnoza antropologiczna.” In: *Nowoczesność jako doświadczenie*, ed. R. Nycz, A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, Universitas, Kraków: 2006.

According to the author rituals are "tools to ensure the continuity of experience" („Przemiany,” in: A. van Gennep *Obrzędy przejścia* 13), and the modern suspicion of ritual is one of the causes of "loss of experience," loss of a sense of continuity and the possibility of identifying with the experience of ancestors and others. Contemporary death is de-ritualized, not experienced by the community, prohibited. "The "indecent" drama of natural death" is not culturally processed, but repressed and tabooed (M. di Nola *Triumf śmierci. Antropologia żałoby*, ed. M. Woźniak, trans. J. Kornecka et al. Universitas, Kraków: 2006. 100.)

<sup>50</sup> Barański, J. „Anestetyzacja tanatyczna, czyli o strategii ponowoczesnej kultury wobec śmierci,” In: *Tanatos. Problemy współczesnej tanatologii*. Vol. 7. ed. J. Kolbuszewski. WTN, Wrocław: 2003. 45.

<sup>51</sup> Writing about the experience of death, I mean only the death of another human being. Death of "oneself" abolishes, along with subjectivity, the category of experience.

Różewicz's epitaph is in my opinion a variation of the monument topos. If we consider the monument to be the fundamental commemorative formula for the poet, connected with the problem of "the shape of memory," as well as a kind of prototype for the "negative strategies" of presentation and an emblem for the inexpressibility of experience<sup>52</sup>, the epitaph is an almost exemplary implementation of the concept. Writing about Różewicz's poetic tombstones, I therefore have in mind rather the multifaceted relationships of his funeral and commemorative poems with so understood monument topos, than references to formal aspects of traditionally understood antique or old Polish epitaphs.

However, in the sketch entitled "Mój wiersz" [My poem], the author's interpretation of "Chiaroscuro," we find references to Kochanowski's "Laments," to the tradition of "Renaissance tombs and Baroque graves and gravestones" (Różewicz 66).<sup>53</sup> In the poem itself the clear allusion would be the line "sea carved out/ of black stone" (P3 244), a "baroque" periphrasis of death. Różewicz criticizes the elaborate imagery, complains about the "hungry images" that obscured the "inner poem" and destroyed its original, concise (and most literal) version. The metaphor of overwhelming "gravestone" becomes a metapoetic description of the poem itself: "The poem, with its first nucleus, light and clear, was buried beneath the baroque gravestone...So more verses attached to the first crude structure, as if to the wall of death someone added a baroque tomb" (Różewicz 66-7). Thus we can observe a very clear division between the naked "wall of death" and the added "tomb," between the "core" of the poem, which is "black grain of ergot, as an image of illness and death," and its verbal and visual representation. Between what is horrifyingly real and asemantic and the added order of signs (Różewicz 67).

Jean-Didier Urbain calls this ambivalent combination of "sculpture" and "grave" a "liminal object," suspended between life and death, form and emptiness, a semiotic space established by the living (sculpture) and a somatic space dominated by chaos and decay (sepulcher). Being an empty signifier, it simulates a performance of the "fullness of reference." It carefully "censors, conceals, camouflages" the original trauma of death and the terror of annihilation and reification (Urbain 314).<sup>54</sup>

What is negated by Subject is not the grave itself, but its alleged emptiness, its insignificance, its prevailing silence, the impenetrability of its darkness...The Funeral Object is a *signal* that there is no gaping void; it gives meaning to the absurd, tells about the life after death, and makes death the beginning of the second existence (because that which we can tell about must exist!). Thanks to the imaginary relationship between the visible and the invisible, between signifier and signified, the Object transcends; everything becomes endowed with meaning: Object as well as death. (Urbain 321)<sup>55</sup>

<sup>52</sup> I write about this in my text "Tadeusza Różewicza architektonika doświadczenia" („Wielogłos," 2007 /1)

<sup>53</sup> Różewicz, T. „Mój wiersz." *Odra*. 1984. Vol. 3. 66.

<sup>54</sup> Urbain, J.-D. „Rzeźba/Grób: przedmiot graniczny." trans. M.L. Kalinowski, In: *Wymiary śmierci*... 314.

<sup>55</sup> Urbain, J.-D. „W stronę historii Przedmiotu Funeralnego." trans. M.L. Kalinowski, In: *Wymiary śmierci*... 321.

It is both a material object placed in the physical space and perceivable by senses and a psychological border, a division between the conceivable and representable and that which paralyzes the possibility of conceptualization and representation. "Being impenetrable, it prohibits, censors, separates and conceals something; it divides the world in two, doubling it, because it locates itself between reality and the world of imagination. The authentic perception of "the world of the dead" ends where the Object stops; that is where the world of imagination is realized, and where a myth is born" (Urbain 313-4).<sup>56</sup> Being an opaque cognitive obstacle and a sign of "the fundamental impermeability and secrecy," a "liminal object" implies at the same time the possibility of transgression through an act of imaginative contemplation: "To contemplate a Funeral Object is to inhabit it, to undergo a sort of petrification, to meld with it and become one, to penetrate inside it and to discover there the undisturbed life of the dead and participate in it for a moment; it is to make this the object an emblem of mysterious and prolonged life after death – to live with it" (Urbain 314).<sup>57</sup>

Such "petrified" imagination<sup>58</sup> moving beyond its condition – life – and constructing a "tomb" of its own forms, representations and signs, upon the emptiness, must be aware of the fundamental ambiguity of this transgression. It is not only about crossing ontological and epistemological border, but also ethical one – the limit of appropriateness.

And thus, once again, Różewicz's poetry, which begins by emphasizing its weaknesses and inabilities, and stressing that it "doesn't explain anything" or "doesn't fulfill hopes" (P2 421), turns out to be a fascinating "poetry of poetry" – a complex metapoetic reflection on the sense and possibilities of literature in the face of human experience.

*Translation: Paweł Pyrka*

<sup>56</sup> Urbain, J.-D. „Rzeźba/Grób: przedmiot graniczny.” trans. M.L. Kalinowski, In: *Wymiary śmierci...* 313-314. According to Mikołajko, the language of funeral texts, especially the epitaphs, is a mythical language that goes where *logos* refuses to go. "Speech is helpless in the face of that "pre-ontological experience," in which everything has its beginning and end...Only myth can reach that realm of non-being, which is bubbling with becoming and passing away, only myth can get to its apeiron, its endlessness" („Kilka słów u umarłej” 33) However, it seems that the language of myth is for Różewicz a negative reference, something impossible and inaccessible.

<sup>57</sup> Urbain, J.-D. „Rzeźba/Grób: przedmiot graniczny.” trans. M.L. Kalinowski, In: *Wymiary śmierci...* 314.

<sup>58</sup> There is an interesting similarity between this metaphor and Różewicz's autothematic expressions. In his texts we encounter such suggestive self-determination of the subject as: "I...A grey man with imagination / small, stonelike and inexorable" (P1 68), while the topoi of sculpture and monument are, next to physicality, an area upon which the poet draws most frequently in his poetic and metapoetic imaging.

## Authors' Biographical Notes

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## Holocaust in Literary and Cultural Studies