

Miłosz
in *Pamiętnik Literacki*
[*Literary Memoir*]

Selected Papers

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IBL INSTYTUT BADAŃ
LITERACKICH PAN
WYDAWNICTWO
WARSZAWA 2013

Research project
Miłosz in “Literary Memoir” [“Pamiętnik Literacki”].
Special Issue of “Literary Memoir,” electronic edition,
developed within the framework
of the National Programme for the Development of Humanities
(0233/FNiTP/H32/80/2011)

A collection of articles translated from the Polish by URSULA PHILLIPS

Editor: TOMASZ P. GÓRSKI

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Warsaw 2013

FROM THE EDITORS

To commemorate Czesław Miłosz's 100th birthday, the Editors of *Literary Memoir* [*Pamiętnik Literacki*] prepared translations of several texts devoted to the poet with a view that the selection offers a survey of various stands taken on him and a variety of modes used to speak about his creativity.

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CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ'S "OUTSKIRTS":
AN ATTEMPT AT AN INTERPRETATION¹

Przedmieście

Ręka z kartami upada
W gorący piasek,
Słońce zbiegające upada
W gorący piasek,
Felek bank trzyma, Felek nam daje,
I blask przebija zlepioną talię,
Gorący piasek.

Przełamany cień komina. Rzadka trawa.
Dalej miasto otworzone krwawą cegłą.
Rude zwały, drut splątany na przystankach.
Karozerii zardzewiałej suche żebro.
Świeci glinianka.

Pusta ćwiartka zakopana
W gorący piasek,
Kropla deszczu zakurzyła
Gorący piasek.
Janek bank trzyma, Janek nam daje,
Gramy i lecą lipce, i maje,
Gramy rok drugi, gramy i czwarty,
I blask przez czarne sypie się karty
W gorący piasek.

Dalej miasto otworzone krwawą cegłą,
Jedna sosna za żydowskim domem,
Sypkie ślady i równina aż do końca.
Pył wapienny, toczą się wagony,
A w wagonach czyjaś skarga skamlająca.

[First appeared in *Pamiętnik Literacki* 1987 issue 1; 203-215]

¹ This article was originally presented as a paper at a conference devoted to Miłosz's poetics held at the Institute of the Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, Autumn 1982. In the current, amended version, I have taken into account the discussion at the time as well as comments received privately. I am particularly grateful to Jan Błoński, Jerzy Chałupka, Jerzy Jarzębski and Marek Kwapiszewski. The views of Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska form the basis of her separate article published in this same volume.

Weż mandolinę, na mandolinie
 Wygrasz to wszystko
 Ech palcem w struny.
 Piękna piosenka,
 Jałowe pole,
 Szklanka wypita,
 Więcej nie trzeba.

Patrz, idzie drogą wesoła dziwa,
 Pantofle z korka, czub fryzowany,
 Chodź to, dziewczynko, pobaw się z nami.
 Jałowe pole.
 Zachodzi słońce.

Outskirts

A hand with cards drops down
 on the hot sand.
 The sun turned white drops down
 on the hot sand.
 Ted holds the bank. Now Ted is dealing.
 The glare stabs through the sticky pack
 into hot sand.

A broken shadow of a chimney. Thin grass.
 Farther on, the city torn into red brick.
 Brown heaps, barbed wire tangled at stations.
 Dry rib of a rusty automobile.
 A claypit glitters.

An empty bottle buried
 in the hot sand.
 A drop of rain raised dust
 off the hot sand.
 Frank holds the bank. Now Frank is dealing.
 We play, Julys and Mays go by.
 We play one year, we play a fourth.
 The glare pours through our blackened cards
 into hot sand.

Farther on, the city torn into red brick.
 A lone pine tree behind a Jewish house.
 Loose footprints and the plain up to the horizon.
 The dust of quicklime, wagons rolling,
 and in the wagons a whining lament.

Take a mandolin, on the mandolin
 you'll play it all.
 Heigh-ho. Fingers, strings.
 So nice a song.
 A barren field.
 The glass tossed off.
 No more is needed.

Look, there she goes, a pretty girl.
 Cork-soled slippers and curly hair.

Hello sweetheart, let's have a good time.
 A barren field.
 The sun is setting.²

Author's forename and surname: Czesław Miłosz. Title: *Outskirts* (*Przedmieście*). Composed: during the Occupation (1939-1945). Place of birth: Warsaw. Provenance: the cycle of verse entitled *Voices of Poor People* (*Głosy biednych ludzi*) published in the volume *Rescue* (*Ocalenie*, 1945). Has it been reprinted? Yes, many times, in most editions of the poet's selected poems. Vital statistics: 38 lines. Verse structure: irregular, consisting of 5- to 12-syllable lines, dominated by a trochaic-amphibrachic metre, some third paeons occur. Can anyone provide a paper reference? No one (the poem, although well known, has not been the object of separate analysis). Distinguishing marks? – But here the difficulties begin in filling out our official questionnaire. The answer “everything” would certainly be too general and satisfy no one; on the other hand, a “lack” of distinguishing marks would misrepresent reality and immediately arouse distrust and suspicion.

The literary historian would be able to provide a short answer to all the other questions without fearing a discrepancy with the formula: “I, the undersigned, confirm the above information to be true to the best of my knowledge”; but in the case of the “distinguishing marks,” this is impossible, all the more so since every one of those literary historians signing the document would probably indicate something different. It would also be impossible if we were to continue our questionnaire and pose further questions. The theme? The poem describes how a group of men, most likely young men, play cards on a hot day in the open air on the outskirts of some large city and enjoy an alcoholic drink. Enough! We must refrain from this kind of question and answer immediately. The opinion we have just expressed proves how disturbingly easily it is to pass from a bureaucratic style to an essayistic style – to that of school exercise-books or school-boy humour.

However, we shall treat our official questionnaire seriously. There is no way we can deny that these “personal details” of the poem consist of important, factual information essential to its proper interpretation. There are facts here which not only gentlemen but also – interpreters, do not discuss. Their proper work begins where there are no longer any undisputed facts. The poem's distinguishing marks, despite the expectations of fans of personal questionnaires, are not given in advance; we have to consider first what goes into their making, we have to expose them first. The perspective that the interpreter acknowledges as his or her own obviously influences the process of exposure – and is a constant factor in the “discussion” which inevitably arises once we abandon the sphere of narrowly understood “factology,” irrespective of whether this includes bibliographical data or basic statements relating to versification.

In *Outskirts*, a distinguishing mark that immediately suggests itself is that the poem is a kind of poetic image, a realistic ordinary, everyday little scene of man-

² The Polish text is from Czesław Miłosz. 1993. *Wiersze*. 3 vols. Kraków: Znak, vol. 1, 192-193. The English version, which is by Miłosz himself and not precisely equivalent in some places, as will become apparent, is quoted from Czesław Miłosz. *New and Collected Poems*. London: Allen Lane, 65-66. Note that the translation of the poem's title is *Outskirts*, not *Suburb*, which might be an alternative translation appropriate to the current discussion – Trans.

ners. On a first reading, the generic classification “poetic image” may appear to be equally indisputable (and, therefore, also to be a “fact”), in the same way that the work consists of 38 lines and was published in the volume *Rescue*. Let us assume for the time being that this really is the case, and reflect on what this poetic little scene consists of.

In the foreground are the men playing cards, known by name – Felek and Janek (in the English version – Ted and Frank respectively, which are not the actual equivalents of the Polish names – Trans.). There are certainly more players; among them is the man (“ten”) who describes the scene (“Felek nam daje,” “Ted deals to us”; “to us” is not in the English version – Trans.). At the end of the poem another figure appears, unacquainted either with the players or the reader (“Look, there she goes, a pretty girl”). If we were to take into consideration only this foreground, we might easily come to the conclusion that Miłosz’s *Outskirts* recalls the early poems of the Skamandrites, especially Julian Tuwim and Kazimierz Wierzyński. It would seem, however, that this similarity should be regarded as illusory, even if we were to remain only within the boundaries of the “foreground.” Illusory, since in the case of poets who achieved literary fame immediately after 1918, the motif of the suburb was a highly significant one, for various reasons: because it allowed varieties of language to be introduced into poetry that had had no access to it before; because it expanded the repertoire of subject matter with which it was appropriate for poetry to deal, and so on. For the Skamandrites, the suburb as a theme was a distinguishing mark; for Miłosz, writing a quarter of a century later, it had already ceased to be so. This motif did not disturb the traditional poetic order, since that had ceased to exist a long time ago. It did not disturb it, despite the fact that the poet applied the same procedures as the young Tuwim or young Wierzyński, or at least so it seemed on the surface.

The suburban scene allows the introduction of colloquial speech – speech which until not very long ago had still seemed to contradict poetic language. In Miłosz’s poem, however, colloquial language is not emphasized in the way it was by the Skamandrites; here, it appears as an obvious or indeed natural element – the “low” style no longer requires justification. The poetic image (the scene of manners) not only allows realistic details of everyday life to be represented, it also directly establishes them. Investigations into the authenticity of everyday realia, into their credibility, have always seemed to me among the least impressive activities to which literary historians devote themselves; however, when we read *Outskirts*, it is impossible not to notice that the poet treats the realia of everyday life under Occupation as if he were writing a realistic novel, not a short poem. In order to be convinced of this, it is enough to remind ourselves of the type of elegance with which the “pretty girl” (note: the Polish version has “wesola,” *i.e.* merry, cheerful – Trans.) is associated (“Cork-soled shoes and curly hair”). Also, the vision of the suburb itself is built up of seemingly significant details, although these are not necessarily specific to the Occupation, and are constructed rather on the basis of an enumeration of elements than of any synthesizing concept. It is simply a poverty-stricken *suburbium*, whose boundaries are defined by claypits and rubbish dumps.

The suburban scene present in the foreground occupies not only the basic space of the poem, shown without distance, in close up; it is also the place from which

we see what is in the background, in the distance – namely, the city. “Farther on, the city torn into red brick” (“Dalej miasto otworzone krwawą cegłą”; note that the reference to blood (“krew”) in the adjective “krwawa” is potentially lost in the English “red” – Trans.): this clause (which appears twice in identical form) is of fundamental significance for the vision of space contained in the poem. For Miłosz’s poetic cityscape is constructed out of two grounds (the foreground and the background). When the phrase appears for the first time (line 9), it does nothing except indicate that background, signals its existence, but as yet says little about it. Something else happens, however, when it returns: it becomes as if the point of departure for the poet to sketch the city in the distance in general terms, yet in an extraordinarily concise manner:

Dalej miasto otworzone krwawą cegłą,
 Jedna sosna za żydowskim domem,
 Sypkie ślady i równina aż do końca.
 Pył wapienny, toczą się wagony,
 A w wagonach czyjaś skarga skamlająca.

Farther on, the city torn into red brick.
 A lone pine tree behind a Jewish house.
 Loose footprints and the plain up to the horizon.
 The dust of quicklime, wagons rolling,
 and in the wagons a whining lament.

In this phrase, essential to the spatial vision, the participle “otworzone” (“opened up” or “torn open” (the English version has “the city torn in red brick” – Trans.) reveals the perspective from which the city is perceived, since it involves a formulation that comes close to an oxymoron: “bloody brick” (the English version has “red brick” – Trans.) may be interpreted (though it does not have to be) as a metonymy for wall, and therefore for something that encloses (especially as “otworzone” evokes sound-wise the word “otoczony,” meaning “surrounded”). Here it “opens up” the city; it is the city’s first element noticeable from the distant suburban perspective, where there are “brown heaps” and the only adornment is a claypit.

The suburb, being an observation point, is also the place of some kind of “action,” treated elliptically, scarcely alluded to. It is here that the young men devote themselves to the risks of the card-game, and here that they invite the unknown, fashionably dressed woman to join in the game. This action does not develop into a logical plot-line, does not exceed the stage of potentiality. On the surface – let us repeat – the action is enclosed in an ordinary, realistic scene of manners. And it has the character if not of a ballad, then of something that is ballad-like. Although presented in an elliptical manner and, moreover, in a poem that is very short, having – let us recall – only 38 lines, it establishes narrativity. In the poetry of recent decades³, it might seem that all poetic narration assumes the character of a ballad to a greater or lesser extent, that the ballad – transformed in some way or other, or invoked by way of allusion as a distant model – was the only vital means of poetic story-telling, and that every poetic account, even if not obviously stylized, took on the shape of a ballad. It would certainly be no exaggeration to say that in *Out-*

³ Note the present article was originally published in 1987 – Trans.

skirts elements of the ballad may be found at least in vestigial form. The scene of manners narrated in verse becomes a ballad-like construction.

However, the suburban setting is not simply the place where the barely outlined action is played out; it is also the object of description. The description is separated from the narration stylistically, above all by phrases without verbs (repeated several times – both as an element of a phrase, and as a self-contained construction – “hot sand,” also the “broken shade of a chimney. Thin grass,” “lone pine behind a Jewish house,” “cork-soled shoes and curly hair”) and by repetitions, which somehow signal the permanence, or unchangeability of this world. Another obvious characteristic of the descriptive parts is the occurrence of passive participles within the verbless phrases. Because they are repeated, they help create the specific stylistic profile of the poem, all the more so, as they stand out against the trochaic-amphibrachic metre, since they consist mostly of four syllables. Furthermore, their role is not limited to this: these participles, or at least some of them, seem to support the dynamism of the presented world, thereby bringing description closer to narration.

So far we have mainly discussed the two spatial grounds (the foreground and the background) and the scene of manners shown in close-up. An analysis of the poem cannot be confined, however, to these elements – these are important and immediately conspicuous, yet somehow only preliminary. More significant is what exceeds the poetics of the scene itself, what questions the poetics by breaking in from outside, what does not allow the poem to be simplistically reduced only to it. These questioning factors manifest themselves, I think, when three important elements are taken into consideration, namely the construction of the speaking subject, the construction of time and – which is certainly the most important – the symbolism, or set of symbolic representations, that develops within the poem.

How is this scene of manners presented? Who relates it? From what perspective are the city and the outskirts outlined? I already mentioned this last question when I said that the city is shown as it is perceived from the suburbs, but this does not exhaust the matter, though it indicates a crucial fact. The speaking subject manifests himself here exceedingly sparingly; we can have no doubt, however, that he is one of those who surrender themselves to the suburban pleasures. In the first four episodes (I’m not sure if they can be called “stanzas” since they are of varying length, and none repeats the classic strophic structure traditional in Polish)⁴, he appears in two parallel formulas: “Now Ted is dealing,” “Now Frank is dealing,” as well as in the twice repeated “We play.” The situation changes in the two closing episodes. Not because the subject suddenly begins to speak in the first person. He comes to voice in a more indirect way, namely through the use, several times, of the second person singular. The peculiarity of this second-person form of address stems from the fact that on each occasion it has a different addressee. The matter is less complicated in the final stanza, therefore we will begin with it:

Patrz, idzie drogą wesola dziwa,
Pantofle z korka, czub fryzowany,
Chodź to, dziewczynko, pobaw się z nami.

⁴ For this reason, following the author, I shall use “episode” throughout the article, not stanza, except where he specifically uses “stanza” – Trans.

Jałowe pole.
Zachodzi słońce.

Look, there she goes, a pretty girl.
Cork-soled slippers and curly hair.
Hello sweetheart, let's have a good time.
A barren field.
The sun is setting.

In the formula "Chodź tu" (literally: "Come here" but in Miłosz's English version: "Hello sweetheart" – Trans.), a female addressee is indicated, so there is no doubt who is being addressed. To whom, however, is the command "Patrz" ("Look") directed? Here, there are at least two equally valid possibilities. Either the speaking subject addresses himself (which is very likely, since he takes into consideration the previous episode, about which in a moment), or one of his companions in the card-playing contest. If we were to accept the first possibility, we would have to acknowledge that this is a fragment of some kind of internal monologue; if, on the other hand, if we favour the second possibility, then this would be a fragment of a one-sided dialogue. It may seem that favouring one or other of these possibilities is insignificant for the overall interpretation of the poem's meanings. However, asking ourselves to whom the words in the second-person singular are addressed in the previous episode, is significant:

Wygrasz to wszystko
Ech palcem w struny.
Piękna piosenka,
Jałowe pole,
Szkłanka wypita,
Więcej nie trzeba.

Take a mandolin, on the mandolin
you'll play it all.
Heigh-ho. Fingers, strings.
So nice a song.
A barren field.
The glass tossed off.
No more is needed.

Who, then, is to play all this on the mandolin? It would seem to be neither Felek (Ted) nor Janek (Frank); if they wanted to play something, then it would surely be another round of their popular card-game⁵. And hence it is the third choice, the one about whom the least is said directly, although he participates in the suburban scene – that is, the poet. We should not forget that musical instruments have been symbols (or signs) of poetic creativity since time immemorial. We would hardly expect in *Outskirts* that a lute or lyre would be invoked in this traditional

⁵ We do not know from the text of the poem what card was being played, though from the context is clearly a popular game. Głowiński suggests it could have been "oko" or "zechyk," but the former is considered much more likely by Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska (see her comment in footnote 17 of the accompanying article). The precise game, however, is immaterial here to the argument, the point being that the card-game described would have been a game played by ordinary working-class people such as Janek and Felek – Trans.

role; thus only plebeian instruments were at the poet's disposal, only the accordion or mouth-organ could have competed with the mandolin (probably not even the guitar). And so the mandolin, as befits a suburban scene of manners, is the instrument on which the poet has to play his beautiful song. It would also seem that in this part of our analysis, we may dispense with scholarly habits and instead of speaking of the lyric subject, speak simply of the poet. And it is precisely when the poem mentions poetry, albeit in an indirect manner, that an element appears which is alien to its other episodes, at least in this form: irony. Not only is the poet presented ironically, as an unmistakable though discreet participant in the suburban fun, but his very activity is also treated ironically, as being incompatible with what is going on around him. The introduction of the element of irony is characteristic of Miłosz; he does not conceive of poetry in categories of pathos, expression, the craft of bards. In this poem he wouldn't even have been able to conceive of like that, because it would have conflicted with the poem's particular informality or ordinariness. The internal speech of the poet in this cityscape, whose style has been debased, can be nothing but ironic speech. The poet in the world of Felek, Janek (or Ted and Frank) and the "pretty girl" ("wesoła dziwa") has no givens that could enable the poet to treat himself otherwise.

Ironic metapoetic reflection questions the poetics of the scene of manners as though from the outside, it is – in a sense – something extra, a supplement or addendum (although as it envelopes the whole poem, it becomes an integral part of it). In a different way, the norms of its poetics are challenged by the temporal structure. On the surface this is extremely simple, like everything else in the poem. The temporal framework is clearly indicated: the action of this poetic image or scene takes place on a swelteringly hot day. "The sun turned white sink downs / into hot sand" – we read in the opening episode. "The sun is setting" – the final line announces. There is nothing strange in this. The time of the image is short and measurable time, it fits comfortably into a single day; the scene of manners is necessarily a one-off, closed phenomenon. Miłosz appears, on the surface, to respect this property of time, although signals are already emerging that force us to treat this time in a specific way (like the transition from the "hot sand" of the first part of the poem, to the "barren field" of the final part). From a certain moment, this other time distinctly reveals itself:

Janek bank trzyma, Janek nam daje,
Gramy i lecą lipce, i maje,
Gramy rok drugi, gramy i czwarty,
I blask przez czarne sypie się karty
W gorący piasek.

Frank holds the bank. Now Frank is dealing.
We play, Julys and Mays go by.
We play one year, we play a fourth.
The glare pours through our blackened cards
into hot sand.

Within the compass of the hot day, there thus appears another kind of time measured in months and years, which clearly alters the temporal structure of the work. Time as though loses its empirical nature, and becomes subject to a kind of

generalization – and in this way disturbs the poetics of the scene of manners. At this point we are no longer dealing with a suburban cityscape. When one knows the circumstances in which the poem arose, there is no easier task than to identify this time precisely and to locate it within a measurable historical period, as if the time of the poem could be reduced to time recorded in historical calendars. The temptation to do this is great, all the more so since such a procedure seems both justified and rational. I am not sure, however, whether we should give in to it. Ultimately, both the great time and the small time of *Outskirts* belong to the same historical time – a time that is not spoken about directly and not named directly, but which is nevertheless omnipresent in the poem; this is determined by the reader's knowledge, consciousness of the context which the recipient has at his or her command, a consciousness that is an essential factor in the act of reading. This does not mean, though, that it should incline the reader to any literal or concrete interpretations.

This peculiar duality in the reception of time, however, affects the narrative structure of the poem – affects it through the very fact that it robs everything that makes up the scene of manners of any literal meaning, as though robbing it of concreteness or precision. And even more than that: as though it questions the particular action, or mini-action, that allows us to speak of *Outskirts* as ballad-like. For that action proceeds perhaps only in the small time, from the broiling midday heat to sunset; great time is no longer its time. It is precisely this duality that determines the symbolization of time in the poem; while it also causes development to be subordinated to something else: repetition. This text does not develop linearly; it is constructed out of repetitions. Repetitions encompass not only elements of description, but also what makes up the plot. On the other hand, the repetitions are in some sense outside of time; they therefore efface the differences and contrasts between great and small time. And they also lead the entire world of the poem into another dimension – the symbolic dimension.

And here we come to the third factor questioning the poetics of the scene of manners from outside – namely, the symbolic elements. First of all, however, we should make quite clear that these images that do not necessarily have to be treated as symbols, since they can also be recognized as components of the “realistic plan.” It is enough to recall the “red brick” from the repeated phrase “Farther on, the city torn into red brick” or the couplet that closes the fourth episode:

Pył wapienny, toczą się wagony,
A w wagonach czyjaś skarga skamlająca.

The dust of quicklime, wagons rolling,
and in the wagons a whining lament.

It does not require much nous or research to ascertain what kind of wagon is being referred to in a poem written during the Occupation. But this is also, or so it would seem, not about the simple contrast between the ludic character of the suburban scene and the macabre reality closing in on all sides. For Miłosz, such a contrast would certainly have been too easy poetically. What this is about is, above all, the construction of a simultaneous reality, to which the red (literally “bloody” or “blood-red” – Trans.) brick and the game of cards and the lament coming from the passing wagons and the bottle of vodka all contribute. Here, the

construction of a uniform world is a question of precisely the symbolic treatment of the invoked elements or – more precisely still – of a set of symbols that has been summoned into life, where this set of symbols is understood as an integrated whole organized according to distinct and concrete principles. The world portrayed in the poem exists in full sunlight and yet, at the same time, is a devastated, dilapidated, degraded world; and moreover, the sunlight illuminates above all wastage and ugliness (“The glare stabs through the sticky pack [of cards],” “The glare pours through our blackened cards”) – here the sun is a sun of doom and decay, terrible and cruel. The suburban landscape is of a similar character:

Rude zwwały, drut splełany na przystankach.
 Karoserii zardzewiałej suche żebro.
 Świeci glinianka.

Brown heaps, barbed wire tangled at stations.
 Dry rib of a rusty automobile.
 A claypit glitters.

Such formulations should not be reduced, however, to what we are accustomed to call the aesthetics of ugliness, the poetry that was the great discovery of Baudelaire and Rimbaud. We should not do so because ugliness here is not a value in itself, not a positive distinguishing mark (as it was for those who discovered its poetic qualities and for their numerous epigones). Ugliness in itself had already ceased to be – like the motif of the suburb – a motif that carries poetical weight; its function becomes apparent only when it is appropriately exploited and subordinated to superior poetic aims. And this is what happens in *Outskirts*. This does not mean, of course, that we can ascribe to every element of the poem some second – hidden – meaning, that every element can be deciphered and elucidated. Such an endeavour would conflict with the poem’s poetics and be condemned in advance to fiasco; above all, it would indicate incompetence in reading poetry (not only Miłosz’s but poetry in general). For the issue is not to confirm “what the poem is about” but to uncover how extra meanings are constructed upon what is literal and accessible at first glance. These extra meanings are precisely those symbols taken as an integrated whole that I discussed above: the symbolic representation of a detail which makes this poetic world unique – the world of an ordinary little scene of manners which, at the same time, is a world of historical tragedy; symbolic representation that causes a modest little tale about a group of blokes playing cards to become something much more.

In the symbolic construction which is this poem, two verbal formulas or – if you like – two images are especially characteristic: the “hot sand” and the “barren field.” The first appears as many as six times, always isolated in a separate line: three times in the first episode and three times in the third episode. The second formula or image appears twice, once in the fifth episode and once in the sixth – in both cases also having its separate line. We could accept that both the “hot sand” and the “barren field” belong to the descriptive order of the poem and outline the background against which the card-game scene is enacted. Together they create the landscape, but they are not confined to this; moreover, it seems their descriptive function is decidedly a side issue. Let us therefore examine more precisely the

place they occupy in the poem. Above all, they are closely associated with one another, which is proved at least by the fact that the poet singles them out in a similar way, not only through the use of repetition, but also by making them stand apart in separate lines. A kind of parallelism therefore arises, emphasized all the more since the words of both resonate only with themselves; the poet does not associate them with any other expressions through the help of rhyme or assonance. In addition, it is worth noting that both images appear consequentially in different segments of the poem, so that we may assume that the "barren field" somehow replaces the "hot sand."

"Barren field" is easier to explain; we shall therefore reflect first on this. One reason that makes it easier is because the notion of space in this image is immediately associated with familiar symbolic baggage. Even if it is not a conscious allusion to another poem with a complex symbolic structure, then it is at least a reference to it which the reader must take into account. I am thinking, of course, of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and so of a work of which Miłosz was completing a translation at more or less the same time he was writing *Outskirts*. Perhaps Eliot's poem is the general, fundamental context in which we should read *Outskirts*; I shall not deal with this problem, however, in the current article.

As I have already mentioned, the "hot sand" is more complicated. Above all because – when treated in isolation – it does not have to immediately impose any symbolic baggage at all, in contrast to the "barren field"; in this respect, it can be neutral. In *Outskirts*, however, it is not neutral; we can say that for sure. It is one of those elements that make something more of the suburban scene, as though leading it into a different register. To state this fact does not present any difficulties of itself, especially since "hot sand" – repeated six times – is the leading motif of the first part of the poem. Difficulty arises, however, when we try to explain why "hot sand" fulfils this particular function, or even – fulfils any function at all. The difficulty especially reveals itself when we remain faithful to a certain habit obligatory in poetry studies. Since it is generally accepted, not without the influence of so-called "archetypical" criticism, that symbols found in a poetical work should be explained by referring to established sources, by seeking their derivation in myths, the Bible, folklore, or various socially determined notions. We proceed, therefore, as if the symbols were established once and for all, as though there existed an established repertoire, beyond which the poet was not allowed to go, or – in other words – as though the poet were first meant to inherit symbols and only afterwards create them himself.

When we reflect on symbolic representation, the genetic dimension inevitably appears, of which we are not generally even conscious. In the current interpretation of Miłosz's poem, however, I would like to depart from this practice. I admit that I do so, to a certain extent, under pressure of necessity. I have not succeeded in finding "hot sand" in any dictionary of symbols. I also cannot remember it ever appearing in any work of the past, which in our Polish cultural sphere might be treated as a kind of *thesaurus* of symbols. I draw certain conclusions from this fact and would say (although this is perhaps only my adjusting ideology to suit my own ignorance) that we should not presume that poetry merely inherits symbols, because it is also continually creating them. There is no reason to assume that a symbol appearing in a poem written during the Occupation possesses meaning, and fulfils

in the poem all its potential functions, only because it appeared in some myth, sacred text or folklore, because there are no such dependencies, no such determinism at work here. This becomes all the more evident when we look at the problem from the perspective of the reader's reception. It cannot be ruled out that some scholar well-versed in symbolic writing might point out where the "hot sand" comes from. Such knowledge will not be, however, the knowledge of the reader, who – if he or she is to understand this poem – must realize that the "hot sand" fulfils particular functions irrespective of its literary or mythological origins. Advanced erudition does not have to be a prerequisite of reading, or – at least in certain circumstances – of interpretation. The pointers contained within the text itself prove to be more significant than those that come from outside it. One thing seems to be without doubt: the six times repeated "hot sand" re-orientates symbolically the space portrayed in the poem, and makes it an eschatological space, a space of death.

The ironic metapoetic thread, the construction of time and the symbolism all question the poetics of the scene of manners by breaking in from the outside, and transport it as though into another dimension. For the poem's poetics, the most important thing is the simultaneous or parallel existence – so to speak – of the questioning and already questioned elements, their peculiar dialectics. Thus, the symbolical element, for example, does not undermine the fact that the poem is written in a "low" style (as an advocate of the classical style divisions might put it); even certain symbols are of this nature, above all that "pretty girl" ("wesoła dziwa"), who recalls the equally symbolic "Radiant Mother K..." ("Promieniejąca K... Mać") from the finale of *Ball at the Opera* (*Bal w Operze*) by Julian Tuwim, a poem that Miłosz could not have known when he was writing *Outskirts* as it was published in full only after the war. It also does not undermine what may be defined as Miłosz's "operating with detail." Many decades later he confessed:

It is not for me to write the history of European culture; others will take this task upon themselves. For me, the problem is highly personal, because in my poems and prose the support has been the remembered detail. Not an "impression" and not an "experience"; these are so multilayered and so difficult to translate into language that various methods have been discovered in the attempt to grasp them: speech that imitates the "stream of consciousness" even to the point of eliminating punctuation marks, of becoming verbal magma, mere babbling. The remembered detail, for example, the grain of the wood of a door-handle polished by the touch of many hands deserved, in my opinion, to be separated from the chaos of impressions and experiences, to be cleansed in some way, so that all that remained would be the eye disinterestedly contemplating the given object⁶.

In this self-commentary the poet indicates one of the fundamental properties of his poetics. It is also revealed with great clarity in *Outskirts*, in which there is as though a constant play between the detail as a concrete thing or component of the world portrayed, and the detail as an element of symbolic representation. And here we encounter the type of detail that I shall call ludic. Paradoxically, it plays an exceptionally important role in Miłosz's poems from the time of the Occupation. It is enough to recall only the roundabout in *Campo di Fiori*. The roundabout is an element of a distinct contrast, juxtaposed with the ghetto which was liquidated in

⁶ Czesław Miłosz. 1991. "The Sand in the Hourglass" from *The Garden of Knowledge*. In *Beginning with my Streets: Essays and Recollections*, translated by Madeline G. Levine. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 103.

1943. In *Outskirts* there is no such contrast, although the poem does speak of the "whining lament" coming from the passing wagons. It is as if a uniform or homogenous world arises, to which – for differing reasons – the wagons and the "city torn into red brick" and the young men playing cards, all belong. The ludic detail is not an element of everyday reality contrasted with the great and terrible history happening all around; in Miłosz's poetry history is enmeshed with the everyday.

And here we come to the issue that is especially important for *Outskirts* and, perhaps, even for Miłosz's poetry of the Occupation in general. He does not wish to write about history directly (he spoke of this on many occasions), but seeks a style which would allow him to come to terms with it, yet, at the same time, would remain free from being directly subject to its conditionings. We might say that in those poetical works by Miłosz which are a direct reaction to history, the most important role is played by mediating factors, or that he is striving to work out his own style of mediation. It would seem that *Outskirts* is one of the most outstanding realizations of this conscious and conscientious striving. In this poem, history finds a voice through the mediation of a little scene of manners, including the ludic details of which the scene is composed. History is constantly there (*Outskirts* cannot be read with understanding, if we forget this), but in some way it is also not there, and in any case not there in any direct sense, it is not in the foreground; it is therefore necessary to continually strive to reach it through our own reading and interpretative efforts. In this simultaneous "being" and "non-being," it is precisely the detail, and above all the ludic detail that plays the chief role. Miłosz's indirect style is one of the most original styles of poetry created during the Occupation. Two main currents are usually identified in this poetry (if we discount popular or utilitarian poetry⁷): the muffled scream of Tadeusz Różewicz and the visionariness of Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński. Dichotomous classifications, however, do not exhaust the phenomenon – Miłosz's poetry prompts us to even revise them.

One final observation. I have tried to extract from *Outskirts* what seems to me to be the most important. However, I am well aware that I have not succeeded in showing the mechanisms that have caused this poem – on the surface a modest realistic scene of manners, which assumes a formal structure close to that of the ballad – to mean so much, mechanisms that have transformed a yarn about young men from the suburbs playing cards into a generalized vision of the world. The task of an interpreter is to point out the distinguishing marks of a work, but – paradoxically – another of his or her duties is conscious capitulation when confronted by a poem that is truly remarkable, outstanding or great, since if it is indeed all of those things, then it will never allow everything to be said about it; something, maybe the "something" that is the most important, will always remain elusive. The interpreter can only hope that his or her capitulation is not an unqualified and unconditional surrender already at the very outset, not a surrender caused by helplessness before embarking the road. Honourable capitulation on the part of the interpreter brings no disgrace; it is the price that must be paid in this profession.

⁷ For an excellent analysis of poetry of this type, see: Jerzy Świąch, *Pieśń niepodległa. Model poezji konspiracyjnej 1939-1945*. Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1982.

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“OUTSKIRTS” AS ANOTHER “SONG ON THE END OF THE WORLD”:
A CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEFINITION
OF CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ’S POETIC ART

This text is an elaboration of the thoughts I expressed in a discussion inspired by Michał Głowiński’s interpretation of the poem *Outskirts* (*Przedmieście*). I was prompted and still am prompted not so much by polemical intentions towards the particular discoveries of that interpretation, as by the unquenched desire to investigate the principles of the poem’s semantic peculiarity, a work whose striking simplicity is hard to take at face value.

I have already indicated the main thesis of my argument in my title. I interpret the poem *Outskirts*, which belongs to the war-time cycle *Voices of Poor People* (*Głosy biednych ludzi*), as one of Miłosz’s versions of the idea of “the end of the world.” In the opening poem of the cycle, *Song on the End of the World* (*Piosenka o końcu świata*), this idea finds a direct explanation: *on the day the world ends life goes on as usual and no one believes that it is happening now*.

A którzy czekali błyskawic i gromów,
Są zawiedzeni.
A którzy czekali znaków i archanielskich trąb,
Nie wierzą, że staje się już.

And those who expected lightning and thunder
Are disappointed.
And those who expected signs and archangels’ trumps
Do not believe it is happening now.¹

[First appeared in *Pamiętnik Literacki* 1987 issue 1; 217-231]

¹ Czesław Miłosz. 1993. *Wiersze*. 3 vols. Kraków: Znak, vol. 1, 184. The translation of *Song on the End of the World* (*Piosenka o końcu świata*) is by Anthony Miłosz, in Czesław Miłosz. 2001. *New and Collected Poems*. London: Allen Lane, 56 (hereafter: *New and Collected Poems*, followed by page number). The text of *Przedmieście* is taken from Miłosz, *Wiersze* 1, 192-193. The translation of *Outskirts* is likewise from Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems*, 84-87, translation by Czesław Miłosz, and is the same as used in my translation of Michał Głowiński’s article. Hence I use *Outskirts* as the translation of *Przedmieście*, and not *Suburb*. Other translations from Miłosz’s poetry are also taken from *New and Collected Poems*. Quotations from *Outskirts* and from other poems from *Voices of Poor People* will be given in both languages, otherwise only in English. Unless otherwise stated, the translations are by Miłosz himself with or without Robert Hass. Where I have been unable to find

Song on the End of the World has a programmatic value not only because it introduces the whole cycle *Voices of Poor People*, but also because it is the only text that shows directly a formula of "the end of the world," a formula which refers also to other poems by Miłosz during this period, pervaded by an eschatological experience that it *is happening now*. This formula, used by Miłosz in ways far-removed from the doctrinal sense, and never clearly explained by him in concrete terms, establishes – thanks to its sacred origins – a permanent, inflexible and timeless system of references and values for evaluating the contemporary historical events. In associating them with an established group of age-old notions, the formula does not prejudice, however, their poetic expression.

In a world where "given the way the world was, if you actually wanted to say something about it, you'd have to scream, not speak,"² the poet was confronted by the need to create a "new diction."³ Finding it would be the most difficult condition and gauge of the poet's creativity. A simple continuation of the pre-war tradition, which had suddenly slipped into the past and undergone a destructive revaluation, had become impossible. Established hierarchies, indicators of poetic artistry and ways of impressing the reading public with one's skills were no longer important; signs of poetic innovation and conservatism had been erased. It was not this sharp discrepancy, however, between the elaborated rules of art and the violently altered historical situation that deprived the individual artist of his chances of success. The real threat, in my opinion, stemmed from the fact that the new experiences were just as commonplace as they were intense and nightmarish, shared by the human masses, who desired to give expression to them by any possible means, so that the voice of the poet was easily drowned amid the popular chorus. The amoral effortlessness of shallow descriptions of lawlessness and atrocity, the helplessness of even the most powerful verbal judgments, the hopeless stereotypicality of bitter national grudges and patriotic fortification of the spirit, and at the same time a feeling of great national need for all that – crushed creative writers seeking their own voice with its unimaginable burden.

Miłosz too found himself among them, as well as caught up in a painful psychodrama with the milieu of young Warsaw poets. Its confused motives were not exclusively of a literary nature, but in this sphere too Miłosz's attitude towards Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński, Tadeusz Gajcy, Andrzej Trzebiński and others was highly complex. Miłosz's later references to this period, reticent and subjected to severe self-censorship, prove how powerfully he experienced his separateness (not to mention – foreignness) and how stubbornly he strove to transform it into a value. Today's reader can sense the innumerable fibres binding *A Poem on Frozen Time* (*Poemat o czasie zastygłym*, 1933) and *Three Winters* (*Trzy zimy*, 1936) to the creative production of the next generation. For irrespective of how the tide of poetic impulses ebbed and flowed in the intellectual life of occupied Warsaw, there

translations, the translations are my own and are intended to convey the literal sense, they make no pretensions to artistic excellence – Trans.

² Miłosz's words as cited by Renata Gorczyńska (pseud. Ewa Czarnecka) in Ewa Czarnecka and Aleksander Fiut. 1987. *Conversations with Czesław Miłosz*. Translated by Richard Lourie. San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 127.

³ Miłosz, *New and Selected Poems*, 144. A well-known formulation from Part IV of his *Treatise on Poetry* (*Traktat poetycki*), 1957; see *Wiersze 2*, 57-68 ("Chcę nie poezji, ale dykeji nowej").

is no doubt that the pre-war Miłosz was imbibed by Baczyński and relived by his contemporaries. He himself, however, remained in a deep spiritual breach from them and insisted all the more on his separateness, but in order to consolidate this, he had to overcome his own former self whom the others had assimilated.

I don't believe he was able to free himself at all from the ties that bound him to other poets, caused by the intersecting of his biography with other human and literary destinies, but his dogged striving to be different dramatizes in an unusual way the sense and form of his literary activities at that time, of which the documentary evidence is the collection *Rescue (Ocalenie)* published immediately after the war (1945). The poems contained in the volume cover a wide poetic range, covering many different themes, tonalities, patterns of speech, compositional solutions, but above all – ways of formulating the speaking or lyric subject. At the same time, they reveal an extreme tendency to either present I-speakers directly as I-poets, or on the contrary, to distinctly separate them from poets, embodying the I-speaker instead in a fictional figure, the mask of a persona, whose speech – uninhibited by the formal directness of authorial confession – might be able to multiply the meanings of that confession. By experimenting with different styles and situations of the speaking subject, Miłosz created texts that are different, however, only on the surface; for in essence they are merely different crystallizations of the author's self-knowledge on the theme of his own times, not stylistic experiments for their own sake, or contemplation of generic scenes, play with conventions or performances of chattering masks. We could say that he was aiming through the multiplicity and changeability of his poetics towards a unity of ideas.

Seen in this perspective, *Outskirts* would also not seem to be an ephemeral efflorescence of the poet's populist interests, but rather a significant – for his strategy – test of a certain point of view, which is constantly being refashioned afresh in every new poem, and which is essential to his vision of the world. This vision, although articulated by the voices of many different figures, does not become a mosaic of other people's thoughts and experiences, because it expresses the continually refilling consciousness of only one subject – a consciousness dominated by certain constant cultural horizons, sources of ideas, spheres of sensibility and disgust, recurring motifs loaded with meaning, accepted models of values, and so on. One of the lasting, permanent components of this consciousness is the eschatological element, which radiates with great force – a radiation capable of penetrating even the tissue of poems as apparently far-removed from ultimate things as *Outskirts*.

The truth about “the end of the world” as a generalized reflection on actual historical experience turns out to be just as banal as it is well chosen, just as sterile to contemplate as it is hard to pass over in silence. As a literary theme it can shock, or it can be boring. In the work of the poets of the Occupation, an equivalent figure would be the motif of the Apocalypse; sticking to his own path, Miłosz ignores this in silence. Besides, he also avoids referring directly to the simple formula of “the end of the world,” which he introduces openly – as I mentioned above – only in that one poem, but does so by polemicizing with hackneyed notions of what the end of the world may look like. For *A Song on the End of the World* portrays “the day the world ends” by means of a series of extremely sensual and attractive images of life, imbued with cheerfulness and the peaceful rhythm of permanence, and

then provides this with an authoritative and irrevocable final commentary – or verdict: “There will be no other end of the world.”⁴ The effect of this poem hinges on the enormous abyss between the imagery and the commentary. In other poems, this relationship undergoes a change; the role of the commentary becomes weaker, while the eschatological message becomes inscribed in the imagery itself, even camouflaged by it.

Outskirts is just such a camouflage, concealing ultimate truth beneath the surface of the suburban scene of manners, whose clearly suggestive realistic details easily establish the circumstances and moment of the action (the Occupation, the torrid heat, the sun, the Warsaw suburb and its sandy soil); describe the personal attributes of the protagonists (several, most probably three boys or young men, including two known by name as Felek and Janek – in the English version as Ted and Frank – as well as the “pretty girl”⁵); and also make known their interests (cards, vodka, the mandolin, girls). Here Miłosz records the characteristic climate of everyday life under the Occupation: the sterility of existence and of time ebbing away, the material and social degradation of life, and at the same time its peculiar style, its surrogate entertainments and phoney elegance.

There is no reason to overlook the realistic accuracy of these features of *Outskirts*, even though the poem’s essential meaning strikes at its very foundations. For it forces us to generally doubt in the material reality of the represented world, which succumbs to the laws of death rather than life, and persists on the edge of existence beyond the limitations of earthly time and earthly space, testifying to what has already been announced by *A Song on the End of the World*. The apparently realistic details of the generic scene, once touched by a more observant gaze – crumble and fall to pieces along with the sinking, burnt out sun and the landscape disintegrating into dusty powder, with its *hot sand, raised dust, glare pouring through, loose footprints, dust of quicklime, barren field...* A more or less explicit stigma of destruction brands the entire world of *Outskirts* from beginning to end:

Ręka z kartami upada
W gorący piasek,
Słońce zbielełe upada
W gorący piasek,

A hand with cards drops down
on the hot sand.
The sun turned white drops down
on the hot sand.

This deceptively simple beginning immediately puts us on the trail of one of the symptomatic properties of the text: a structural organization of meanings that renders possible, and establishes two levels of interpretation – a superficial or surface reading, and a deeper reading. The surface reading satisfies the reader’s need for order, reducing the unknown to the known, the complex to the simple, and

⁴ Miłosz, *New and Selected Poems*, 56; *Wiersze* 1, 184.

⁵ As noted in my translation of Michał Głowiński’s article, the English translation of the poem is not an exact equivalent: “pretty girl” is not a precise translation of “wesoła dziwa,” which indicates a girl with whom men might expect “to have a good time” – Trans.

the obscure to the understandable. Hence, from these initial phrases of *Outskirts*, there emerges information about a game of cards that takes place on the hot sand in the sweltering sun. The deeper reading, meanwhile, directs attention towards the meaning of what is obscure, investigates what is not expressed directly, questions what is said. At the same time it does not invalidate the results of the surface reading, but supplements them, re-orientates them, explains them.

The beginning of *Outskirts* strongly tempts us towards the second type of reading. For it forces us to consider immediately the hint of a far-reaching parallelism between motifs that are apparently independent of one another – the *hand with the cards* and *sun turned white*. The predicative phrase *drops down on the hot sand* (*upada w gorący piasek*) is applied identically to both motifs, and causes a certain semantic deflection when compared to what would be a more usual, neutral formulation in this context: *falls* (or: *drops*) *on the hot sand* (*pada w gorący piasek*); the effect being that it concludes more emphatically and reinforces the function of *falling* (*padanie*), transforming it into the sense of *downfall* (*upadek*) and *sinking* (*pogrążanie się*). The ultimate significance of the function of *falling* is further dislocated in both cases by the specific treatment. *Falling on the sand* as well as *dropping down on the sand* are possible actions for *cards*; here, however, *a hand with cards* falls down, a hand separated from the person to whom it belongs – we don't know whose hand – and deprived of causative power, because it is not a hand throwing down cards but a hand falling down – as though passively – along with them⁶. In turn, *the sun turned white* is not only a sun hazed over in the torrid air, but an altered sun which is losing its colour, in a similar way to how colour is lost when life departs (as in the phrases *zbielata twarz* or *zbielale usta*, i.e. a face or lips gone white or pale). And it is precisely this sun, as though it had suddenly undergone some cosmic catastrophe, which *drops down on the hot sand* instead of simply “dropping” or “falling” (*padać*). The disturbing strangeness of the way in which all these images are articulated does not undermine, however, the factual information contained in them – rather, it distorts or deforms it, permeating it with elements of paralysis and disintegration.

The effect of double reading is sustained throughout the whole poem. Here is how the city in the distance is sketched:

Przełamany cień komina. Rzadka trawa.
Dalej miasto otworzone krwawą cegłą.
Rude zwały, drut splątany na przystankach.
Karoserii zardzewiałej suche żebro.
Świeci glinianka.

⁶ According to the classic division of tropes, this image comes close to a synecdoche – *pars pro toto*. However, the usual lesson emanating from this – that the part may represent the whole and guarantee its particular cognition – is too weak and schematic for the meanings that Miłosz conveys in a text constructed in this way. My observation here is in keeping with the thesis developed by Stanisław Barańczak in his 1981 article “Język poetycki Czesława Miłosza. Wstępne rozpoznanie,” *Teksty* 4-5: 155-184, and exemplified precisely by *Outskirts*, as well as by other poems, that Miłosz is a poet more of synecdoche (or more widely: of metonymy) than of metaphor. This comparison, despite its illustrious genealogy and entirely fitting application to the poetry of Miłosz, nevertheless limits, in my opinion, the semantic horizons for interpreting this poetry.

A broken shadow of a chimney. Thin grass.
 Farther on, the city torn into red brick.
 Brown heaps, barbed wire tangled at stations.
 Dry rib of a rusty automobile.
 A claypit glitters.

The image of a *broken shadow of a chimney*, which guides us into the landscape, faithfully records, as it were, the optical phenomenon of the shadow's refraction as it falls onto an uneven surface, but at the same time – within the semantic context of words that connote destruction (*broken*) and the uncertainty of existence (*shadow*) – it loses sensory materiality.

Central to the landscape or cityscape is *the city torn into red brick*. On a cursory, superficial reading, this line seems to provide information about what is located in the foreground of an image viewed from a certain distance. This is precisely why Michał Głowiński can say: “‘the red brick’ [...] ‘opens up the city’; it is the city’s first element noticeable from the distant suburban perspective.” However, the way in which the text is constructed also demands another kind of reading, which follows the trail of the series of words *open* (*otworzone*), *red* – or more literally: *bloody*, *bloodied*, *blood-red* (*krwawa*), and *dry rib* (*suche żebro*). As a result of this reading, we gain the image of a city that has been ripped apart, wounded, opened up like a bleeding open wound or open belly, a city turned upside down and inside out, with its entrails all exposed: the *red* (or: *bloodied*) *brick*, *brown heaps*, *barbed wire*, *dry rib of a rusty automobile*. A vision of the city *opened up* in this manner returns later in Miłosz's poetry, in *A Treatise on Poetry*, Part IV:

*O City, O Society, O Capital,
 We have seen your steaming entrails.*⁷

The intention behind the last line of the stanza discussed above: *A claypit glitters*, which both interrupts and is as if the culmination of the description of the city – is not immediately obvious. It may even seem that it introduces by association semantic elements with a more soothing contrastive tonality (of *bright light* and *water*, for example), in opposition to the *red*, *brown*, *rusty* and *dry* colouring of the preceding images. However, this image too, in the context of the whole poem, turns out to be yet another portentous omen of lifelessness. It owes its ominous quality to the word *glitters* (*świeci*), in association with which the *claypit* loses any possible features of a life-giving body of water, and becomes only a passive reflection of the *glare* (*blask* – see line six of the first stanza) and a repulsive detail in the degraded natural environment of the outskirts. For the *glare*, alongside the *dustiness* (*pylistość*), is one of the two chief components in the portrayal of the suburban landscape, thereby complementing each other's destructive influence⁸. The effect

⁷ Miłosz, *New and Selected Poems*, 142 (the passage appears in italics in the published translation); *Wiersze* 2, 62.

⁸ The lethal power of the glare, the torture of burning or icy light, may also be found Miłosz's earlier pre-war poetry. Here are three examples from *Three Winters*:

“Under the burning sun, the silence of ashes”
 (*Birds*, 1935; *Wiersze* 1, 7; my translation – Trans.)

of the glare, which is an extension of the destructive power of the sun, is especially aggressive: *the glare stabs through the sticky pack (blask przebije zlepioną talię)*, it stabs in a murderous way, not in the way one card normally trumps another (*i.e.* it “stabs” or “pierces” – here the image draws on the double sense of “przebija”); *the glare* – ominously, threatening – *pours through our blackened cards* (line eight of the third stanza); the glare shines in the discarded waste glass – in the *empty bottle* (line one of the third stanza) and the *glass tossed off* (stanza six); the glare radiates from the *hot sand* – a six times repeated crucial motif and valorizing indicator of the world of *Outskirts*.

The next landscape sequence, linked to the preceding one by direct repetition, undergoes a similar semantic transformation, gravitating even more towards the sphere of death and nothingness:

Dalej miasto otworzone krwawą cegłą,
Jedna sosna za żydowskim domem,
Sypkie ślady i równina aż do końca.
Pył wapienny, toczą się wagony,
A w wagonach czyjaś skarga skamlająca.

Further on, the city torn into red brick.
A lone pine behind a Jewish house.
Loose footprints and the plain up to the horizon.
The dust of quicklime, wagons rolling,
and in the wagons a whining lament.

The reference to a single *lone pine* is not a record of the number or species of tree in the field of vision, while the location of this particular pine-tree behind a *Jewish house* – and hence one earmarked for destruction – is not the result of the poet’s pedantry in topographical matters. A single tree standing on the empty earth became, in Miłosz’s poetry, a recurring elementary sign of loneliness, destruction, death – the distilled extract of the wartime landscape⁹:

“The glare strikes. And touched by the light, all that lives dies”
(*Gates of the Arsenal*, 1934; *New and Collected Poems*, 10; *Wiersze* 1, 14)

“... from the heavens of the cold garden
there flows, stronger than the ray of dawn,
a cruel light. Because of its power
a body slowly dying turns
to dust, to the fertile clays of our earth”
(*Dialogue*, 1934; *Wiersze* 1, 33; my translation – Trans.)

Miłosz recalls and explains the obsessive source of this motif: “At that time I frequently dreamed of a light that pursued me and pierced me clean through. A sort of death ray, a laser, that was killing me. That was a leitmotif in my anxiety dreams: fleeing, pursued by a light, a fire, a ray, that pierced like a sword. I don’t know what it meant, because in my poetry light also appears as a source of delight, ecstasy, wonder. [...] That’s one aspect. The other aspect is the cruel, inhuman light that is against life.” (Czarnecka and Fiut, *Conversations with Czesław Miłosz*, 110).

⁹ A similar isolated tree in a barren wasteland, only one transformed into a more abstract spatial arrangement, appears in Tadeusz Różewicz’s poetry as a symbol of extermination in the crematoria, as in the poem *The Massacre of the Boys (Rzeź chłopców*, 1948), quoted below from Tadeusz Różewicz. 1994. *Poezje wybrane / Selected Poems*. Translated by Adam Czerniawski. 2nd ed. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 21:

Rozdzierany jest papier, kauczuk, płótno, skóra, len,
 Włókna, materie, celuloza, włos, węzowa łuska, druty,
 Wali się w ogniu dach, ściana i żar ogarnia fundament.
 Jest już tylko piaszczysta, zdeptana, z jednym drzewem bez liści
 Ziemia.

Torn is paper, rubber, linen, leather, flax,
 Fiber, fabrics, cellulose, snakeskin, wire.
 The roof and the wall collapse in flame and heat seizes the foundations.
 Now there is only the earth, sandy, trodden down,
 With one leafless tree.¹⁰

The image of the lonely tree persists in the poet’s post-war work fused with the memory of the dead:

I, with my one pine anchor on the sandy plain,
 With the memory, passed over in silence, of my dead friends (*On the Spirit of the Laws*)

Like a pine standing among rubble under a stormy downpour,
 In the neon lights, a sad black tree. (*To the Memory of Teresa Żarnower*)

On the plain stands a grey tree.
 [...]
 Gajcy lies sprinkled with earth,
 A twenty-two-year-old forever. (*Ballad*)¹¹

The landscape of mass annihilation, over which the lonely pine rises, is a generalized portrait of the scenery around Warsaw. Reduced to a few synthetic features, it consolidates the experience of LACK, the negativity of experience, all the more intense in that it functions in Miłosz’s poetry as an extreme antithesis to the landscapes of the Vilnius region – the mythologized land of childhood – overflowing in contrast with a SURFEIT of existence. The Mazovian plain is likewise transported into a mythical sphere. The plain’s natural and economic characteristics – the weakly sculpted terrain, sandy soil, meagre vegetation and material disadvantages – are transformed into meaningful attributes of Miłosz’s own *Wasteland*, of an endless and degraded space, where the untidy remnants of life are scorched by the sun and swallowed up by the loose sand, wiping away the boundaries between existence and non-existence:

The survivors ran through fields, escaping
 From themselves, knowing they wouldn’t return
 For a hundred years. Before them were spread

A great closed plain
 like a figure of geometry
 and a tree of black smoke
 a vertical
 dead tree
 with no star in its crown.

¹⁰ From *A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto* (*Biedny chrześcijanin patrzy na getto*) in Miłosz, *New and Selected Poems*, 63; *Wiersze* 1, 189-190.

¹¹ *O duchu praw* (1947; *Wiersze* 1, 266), *Pamięci Teresy Żarnower* (1949; *Wiersze* 1, 265), *Ballada* (1958; *Wiersze* 2, 108); my translations – Trans.

Those quicksands where a tree changes into nothing,
 Into an anti-tree, where no borderline
 Separates a shape from a shape [...] ¹²

The process of the transformation of the typical suburban space into a generalized, universalized space of death is especially pronounced in the stanza of *Outskirts* discussed above. It's true the word *death* does not occur here even once; all the introduced motifs, however, evoke its presence. From the *lone pine behind a Jewish house*, the loose (*sypkie* – and hence condemned to obliteration) *footprints* lead across *the plain up to the horizon* (i.e. literally *to the very end* or *as far as the eye can see: aż do końca*); the *plain* (*równina*) filled in this way turns out to be above all an empty space or desolate wasteland (*pustka*) and not a *plain* in the sense of a flat expanse of land (*plaszczyzna*). At the same time the phrase *up to the horizon*, or *as far as the end* (*aż do końca*) – not however: *without end* (*bez końca*) – makes the reader aware not only of its boundlessness, but also of the earthly limit to the wandering indicated by the *loose footprints*. The *dust of quicklime* (*pył wapienny*), yet another *loosely pouring* element of the landscape, could be rising from the ruined city or it could come from the material being transported by rail; here, however, we are reminded of the lime with which the wagons transporting prisoners were sprayed or mass graves disinfected; the lime, about which Zbigniew Herbert writes in his poem *Warsaw Cemetery* (*Cmentarz warszawski*):

lime on houses and tombs
 lime on memory ¹³

and in the poem *Black Rose* (*Czarna róża*):

it emerges
 black
 from eyes blinded
 by lime ¹⁴

The stanza ends with an obvious reference to the Occupation experience: *wagons rolling, and in the wagons a whining lament* (*toczą się wagony, / A w wa-*

¹² From *A Treatise on Poetry*, Part III; *New and Collected Poems*, 132: *Wiersze* 2, 51.

¹³ Zbigniew Herbert. 2007. *The Collected Poems 1956-1998*. Translated and edited by Alissa Valles. With additional translations by Czesław Miłosz and Peter Dale Scott. New York: Ecco Press, 27.

¹⁴ Herbert, *The Collected Poems 1956-1998*, 164. In mentioning Herbert, I cannot resist the desire to recall the lasting elements of Miłosz's vision of the city that also survive in Herbert's poetry:

On the plain that town flat like an iron sheet
 [...]
 With pavements the color of intestines houses stripped of their skin
 the town beneath a yellow wave of sun
 a chalky wave of moon
 [...]
 On Sunday beyond the bridge in prickly bushes on cold sand
 on rusty grass girls receive soldiers
 [...]

From *Naked Town* (*Miasto nagie*) in the collection *Study of the Object* (*Studium przedmiotu*, 1961) quoted here from Herbert, *The Collected Poems 1956-1998*, 188.

gonach czyjaś [literally: *someone's*] *skarga skamlająca*)¹⁵. Indicating historical *realia*, such as those preserved in this record, does not present in itself a problem for reading and interpretation. On the other hand, the transference of these *realia* out of the immediacy of the historical “here and now” and into a mythical, eternal permanence – does cause a problem. This is because of the verbal form taken by the very image itself¹⁶, and because of the setting in which it is contextualized. The grammatical present tense *rolling* (*toczą się*), which is an imperfect form indicating incomplete action, lacks any more precise substantiation that might suggest the beginning or end of the action described. It passes across a boundless space and – as though encircling it with the *whining lament* – describes its distant outlines with nothing but this one voice. Everything presented here, as in the whole poem, happens of its own accord, through and of itself. All states of affairs or activities are made independent of any causal forces and acquire their own peculiar kind of existential autonomy: there is no one who causes them, no one who is in control of them or who could put an end to them. The lament that can be heard emanating from the wagons exists in an anonymous way, like the hand with cards dropping down; separated from any individual human fate and its temporal and spatial limitations, it resounds in the wasteland of the world, filling it with animal suffering. The tone of this lament is accompanied by the orchestration of the text:

A w wAgonAch czyjAś skArgA skAmlAjącA.

The landscape of *Outskirts*, despite the fact that it is full of human traces, is entirely devoid of people. Because of this, the figures in the foreground – the young men playing cards and the girl walking by – become all the more visible against its backdrop. The vividness of their portraits arises from the poem’s exploitation of scraps of live, colloquial conversation – either directly quoted, or permeating the narration of the scene – sustained according to completely different speech conventions than the impersonal presentation of the spatial aspect:

Felek bank trzyma, Felek nam daje,
[...]
Janek bank trzyma, Janek nam daje,
[...]
Patrz, idzie drogą wesółą dziwa,
[...]
Chodź tu, dziewczynko, pobaw się z nami.
[...]

Ted holds the bank. Now Ted is dealing.
[...]
Frank holds the bank. Now Frank is dealing.
[...]

¹⁵ Here I have quoted, as elsewhere, Miłosz’s own translation of “skarga” as “lament” – but it should be noted that the Polish word also contains the sense of “complaint” or “grievance” – Trans.

¹⁶ Everything I now go on to say about this would have been meaningless, leaving the historical *realia* intact, had the text under discussion taken a different verbal form, for example a form such as: “every day wagons go past full of lamenting people” (“codziennie przejeżdżają wagony pełne lamentujących ludzi”) – A.O.S.

Look, there she goes, a pretty girl.
 [...]

Hello, sweetheart, let's have a good time.
 [...]

The energy and colourfulness of colloquial speech shines out of these phrases, a speech characterized by a particular social milieu and dependent on a concrete situation. It creates the illusion of direct communication, consisting of: the close contact and even intimacy between the partners taking part in the card game (the use of diminutives, personal names); the participation of the one giving the account (*nam daje*, literally: deals to us – this precise translation is omitted from Miłosz's English version – Trans.); the immediacy of the frame of reference (*Look, Hello*; in the Polish, the latter is literally: *Come here* – Trans.); and finally the particular circumstances and speech genres appropriate to them (the professional gaming terminology, the sly and somewhat aggressive overtures made to the girl).

It might therefore seem that the poem's structural principle is the contrast between the cityscape outlined in the background and the actions and life-style of the figures in the foreground. There are, however, enough reasons and enough circumstantial textual evidence to complicate such an interpretation, and to see the situation of the protagonists in another light. It is therefore striking that all the brisk calls, which are the equivalents of the characters' speech, fall into hollow emptiness. On the realistic level of the poem, there is a lack of any reaction to them – of responses or of any kind of continuation or sequel. Following the introduction of the first call of this type during a moment of the game¹⁷:

Ted holds the bank. Now Ted is dealing –

there is no further talk about the behaviour of the people, while the partners in the game seem to be only the glare and the sand:

The glare stabs through the sticky pack
 into hot sand.

This scene is repeated when the place of Felek (Ted in the English version – Trans.) is taken by Janek (Frank), and both the glare and the sand once again enter the game:

The glare pours through our blackened card
 into hot sand.

This time, however, the very recurrence of the situation takes on an unusual significance, because it ceases – despite the initial impression – to relate to some random day in summer, and acquires a never-ending temporal extension:

¹⁷ This is certainly not – since it has nothing to do with “holding the bank” – the game called “zechcyk,” (a corruption of the German for “66,” *sechshundsechzig*) a game enjoyed especially by pensioners and suggested by Głowiński perhaps misled by the generic sound of this name. His other suggestion, namely the game called “eye” (“oko”) is plausible, however, and is most likely to be the game being played here; “eye” is a simple and popular game of risk.

We play, Julys and Mays go by.
We play one¹⁸ year, we play a fourth.

In this time without end, in a space paralysed by death, some lads from the suburbs linger on bent over their cards. Therefore, we ought to look at their occupation with different eyes than we would an ordinary, commonplace, lazy game of cards. For what is at stake in their unending game of risk? What is the meaning of the threatening interventions of the glare in the description of their game, the glare that first *stabs through the sticky pack*, and then *pours through our blackened cards*? What is the meaning of the *black cards*? For it's not just that in the blazing sunlight, one side of a card appears dark or even black in the shade. Behind the black cards there may lurk the idea of a bad omen, misfortune, death... Cards, after all, do not only exist to play games with; they may also conceal the secret of someone's destiny. And perhaps this is precisely a game with fate about life, a game for temporal postponement, a game playing for time – since time is counted here in the same way as the months and years were counted when people were waiting for the war to end? The text of the poem forces us to ask certain questions, although it declines to give clear answers. And so I go on asking:

Who in this case is the unexpected figure, called by the card-players “a pretty girl” (“wesola dziwa:” again this is not an exact equivalent in Miłosz's English version; “wesola” means “merry, happy, gay, cheerful” – Trans.)? And depicted so sharply, as though she had been cut out of a wartime caricature? Is she just one of those “girls wiggling their butts” whom Miłosz recalls elsewhere?¹⁹ We don't know whether she stopped, summoned by the men's aggressive enticement:

Hello sweetheart, let's have a good time.

Since the realistic, scene-of-manners thread of the text breaks off with these words, while there remain only two lines before the end of the poem, namely the two final lines:

A barren field.
The sun is setting.

¹⁸ Again, the English version departs from the Polish: “Gramy rok drugi” translates literally as “We play a second (or: another) year” – Trans.

¹⁹ Czarnecka and Fiut, *Conversations with Czesław Miłosz*, 134: “Yes. There was plenty of moonshine, cork-soled slippers, girls wiggling their butts. That was very typical of the atmosphere toward the end of the occupation, and I don't think it was confined to Warsaw. Something of the sort existed throughout German-occupied Europe.” This is not the only time that a girl of this sort traverses the world of Miłosz's poetry and receives in that world a greater role than in life, a less commonplace role. In circumstances familiar from *Outskirts*, she appears as the bright planet “Venus in a telescope” in *Songs of Adrian Zieliński (Pieśni Adriana Zielińskiego)*, written at more or less the same time:

The round ass of a girl passing by
Is a planet carved by the sunlight's hand
For poor astronomers who watch the sky

As they sit with their bottle on the sand. (*New and Collected Poems 1931-1987*, 70; translation by Renata Gorczynski (sic) and Robert Hass; *Wiersze* 1, 197).

The summons from the lads therefore sinks into the lifeless torpor of the barren field, of the day coming to an end, of the light coming to an end, of the world coming to an end... What in this world might mean the invitation to “have a good time” and to whom might it be directed? Among the traditional age-old themes of literature, alongside the theme of playing a game where the stakes are happiness, life, the soul, there also exists that of challenging fate through an invitation – to join a merry throng, dance, banquet – from a ghost, a phantom, an evil spirit, ultimately a personification of death. Doesn’t the “pretty [or: merry – Trans.] girl,” who appears in the sandy wastes of *Outskirts*, traverse them just like the spectral “maid of pestilence” (“morowa dziewica”) who once “strode with her ominous footsteps” across the “deserted cemeteries and grassy meadows” of a Romantic poem? And although that one was clothed in *white linen with a garland of fire around her temples* (*w bieliźnie, z wiankiem ognistym na skroniach*)²⁰, and the current one is adorned in *cork-soled slippers, and curly hair* (*pantofle z korka, czub fryzowany*) – death reigns over the earth over which they stride in exactly the same manner: palaces are transformed into deserts and fresh graves arise.

This parallel – it is hard to judge to what extent it is not accidental – is not meant to suggest any genetic ties between *Outskirts* and the *Song of the Wajdelota*, although Mickiewicz’s words penetrated immeasurably deeply into the bloodstream of Miłosz’s poetry; it is meant instead to visualize in a direct manner the grim terror of existence, a terror which not only radiates from the landscape of *Outskirts* but which also affects the commonplace figures of its protagonists. For they, without losing their local and immediate generic origin, fulfil at the same time certain timeless situational models, developed by culture to convey metaphysical experiences and existential intuitions.

The metaphysical meaning of Miłosz’s poem finds expression in the UNREALITY of the represented world, which refutes and contradicts the witness of the senses. The strategy of the poet, whose task is to reveal that meaning, depends on the unification of two contrary operations: the striving towards an almost documentary faithfulness to the individual components of the image of the world depicted, and – at the same time – towards a consistent, albeit hidden, saturation of these components with semantic elements that transform this very same world into a desolate space of undefined duration, where all knowledge and cognition become uncertain and existence itself becomes doubtful. The world of the poem remains suspended in a state of existential indefinability, which does not allow it to be clearly fixed either on the side of life or of death²¹. It is significant, however, that

²⁰ Lines 4-6 of the *Song of the Wajdelota* (*Pieśń Wajdeloty*) from Adam Mickiewicz’s narrative poem *Konrad Wallenrod* (1828); my translation – Trans.

²¹ The meaning-creating strategy described here differs, in my opinion, from a symbolizing or symbol-creating strategy in that it does not superimpose onto the represented world, a world of secondary meanings for which the former or initial meanings become no more than a kind of substratum of signs. The whole associational sphere, extraordinary in its homogeneity, along with the particular motifs of *Outskirts*, does not invalidate the world of initial meanings, does not eliminate or transform it into something else – although it does create, as Głowiński points out, certain extra meanings over and above what is literal and accessible at first glance. All its *realia* continue to be the same *realia*: the ruined city remains the ruined city, the hot sand is still the hot sand, the claypit still the claypit, the cards still the cards, the wagons still the wagons, and so on, enriched only with new meanings and values, and seen as a whole in an unusual existential perspective. The scene por-

when an obvious vision of the beyond appears in Miłosz's later poetry, the scenery uncannily recalls *Outskirts*:

[...] Wooden shacks,
A lame tenement house in a field of weeds.
Potato patches fenced in with barbed wire.
They played as-if-cards, I smelled as-if-cabbage,
There was as-if-vodka, as-if-dirt, as-if-time.²²

The protagonists of *Outskirts* live unaware of the enigmatic nature of their existence, the deeper meanings of which are entirely hidden from them. We could say, with reference to the spatial notions linked to Miłosz's idea of life after life, that the light of cognition is just as inaccessible to them as it is to the inhabitants of Dante's *limbo* – of the space before Hell, the abyss, the misty obscure region between Heaven and Hell, where the shadows of noble pagans and unbaptized deceased children "without hope [...] languish in suspense."²³

Beneath the guise of this innocent state of ignorance there lurks, to an extent, the author of the work – to the extent that he manifests himself in the figure of the mandolin player who composes the song. By exploiting this role, he can content himself with a straightforward composition made up of details taken from the visible world and does not have to transcend it with his judgment or understanding. Such structuring of his speech brings it close to the relating of a ballad, and if *Outskirts* is to be received as a ballad-like composition, then this is the result above all of the way in which the world is presented, not so much of the construction of the anecdote itself, which – though it reveals on a deeper reading elements of terror and wonder – does not formulate itself into any narrative structure characteristic of the ballad.

The limited horizons of the song's narration and the primitive good faith of its performer are especially emphasized in *Outskirts* through the use of single evaluative words, such as those that appear in the following, exclusively descriptive text – or so it seems on the surface (emphases are mine – A.O.S.):

*Piękna piosenka,
Jałowe pole,
Szklanka wypita,
Więcej nie trzeba.*

*So nice a song.
A barren field.
The glass tossed off.
No more is needed.*

trayed in *Outskirts* therefore remains to the very end a suburban scene and not, for example, a symbol of the existential situation of people subjected to the oppression of history. It is quite another matter that individual components of the world portrayed in this poem may acquire, within the compass of Miłosz's poetical work, an independent symbolic value, such as the deadly glare or the lonely tree standing on the empty plain.

²² From *On the Other Side (Po drugiej stronie, 1964; Wiersze 2, 144)*, *New and Collected Poems*, 200; translation by Jan Darowski.

²³ Dante Alighieri. 1977. *The Divine Comedy (Inferno, Canto IV)*. Translated by Laurence Binyon; edited with an introduction by Paolo Milano. 2nd ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 21.

This positive evaluation is so out of harmony with the image of the world emerging from the poem that it completely exposes the narrator of the tale as a stylized figure, far-removed from the point of view and self-awareness of the author. The naïve optimism of the command addressed to the mandolin player is also contrasted with the author's conviction of the impenetrability of what is given in the elementary eyewitness experience (my emphases again – A.O.-S.):

Weź mandolinę, *na mandolinie*
Wygrasz to wszystko
Ech palcem w struny.

Take a mandolin, *on the mandolin*
you'll play it all.
Heigh-ho. Fingers, strings.

Authorial distance is also revealed here in the choice of instrument, capable of expressing *it all*. It turns out to be a mandolin, a typical requisite of a peripheral culture, which appears in one of Miłosz's earlier works as a sign of spiritual degradation:

Bełkot mandolin ślad wielkości tłumia,
The stammer of mandolins smothers the trace of greatness²⁴

The textual equivalent in *Outskirts* of a mandolin song used as a stylizing model, is the form adopted by the verse, which – in my opinion – is highly significant in its conception and demands a more attentive interpretation. On this question I take issue with Głowiński, who reckons the construction of the verse in this poem merits only the most obvious description, and appears to be satisfied with the following list of characteristics: “verse structure: irregular, consisting of 5- to 12-syllable lines, dominated by a trochaic-amphibrachic metre, some third peons occur.”²⁵ If it were not for the mention of “verse structure,” such a description could equally be applied to any trivial piece of prose: variations in the length of its segments would be unlikely to exceed 5 to 12 syllables, while the trochaic-amphibrachic metre, in which “third peons occur,” is the normal Polish metre.

The poem *Outskirts*, however, is distinguished by a strikingly regular rhythm, which is the result of the combination of 5- and 4-syllable segments, of which there are altogether 64 out of a total of 68 (there are 37 – 5-syllable segments; 27 – 4-syllable; 2 – 6-syllable; and 2 – 3-syllable). The most frequently occurring is the 5-syllable segment, which is very common in Polish – with the permanent stress or emphasis on syllable 4 and an additional optional stress on syllable 1 or 2 – and appears in Miłosz's poem either singly as an independent line, or in a doubled form as a 10-syllable line (5 + 5). The 5-syllable segment constitutes, as a rule, a coherent semantic fragment, and is thus the form used to present the most distinctive or recurring motifs: *gorący piasek*; *Felek bank trzyma*; *Felek nam daje*; *piękna pio-*

²⁴ From *Slow River (Powolna rzeka, 1936; Wiersze 1, 36)*; my translation. The published translation of this stanza is not sufficiently close to support Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska's argument here – Trans. See *New and Collected Poems, 19*; translation by Renata Gorczynski (sic).

²⁵ Michał Głowiński. 1987. “Przedmieście Czesława Miłosza. Próba interpretacji.” *Pamiętnik Literacki* 78 (1): 203-221; see page 204. See also my current translation – Trans.

senka; jałowe pole; więcej nie trzeba; zachodzi słońce; and so on²⁶. Meanwhile, the 4-syllable segment does not make up any separate lines on its own, but appears most frequently in triple structures as a component of a 12-syllable line, thus maintaining a constant trochaic system, as in the following example:

Da'lej **mia**'sto / **o**'tworzo'ne / **krwa**'wą **ceg**'łą.
Ru'de **zwa**'ły, / **drut**' spląta'ny / **na**' przystan'kach.

The segments of different length are arranged in pairs: 3-syllable pairs or 6-syllable pairs. These do not lead to any disruption in the rhythm and sink into the metrical flow of the poem by contributing to rhythmic correspondences of various kinds: to the regular stanza-like interspersions of lines of varying length, to the pattern of stresses established in the lines, to the lexical-syntactical repetitions, and so on.

All the segments are distinctly separate: they usually consist of self-contained semantic wholes, and are arranged in a succession of homogeneous or rhythmically organized sequences, their boundaries determined by the framework of the lines or fixed divisions within lines. Their structure therefore does not conflict with the structure of the lines; it merely allows a line to be reduced to a smaller number of simpler components, thus better explaining the rhythmic mechanism of the poem. In order to give a rough illustration of the architectonics of the structure of lines and segments, I shall now give the syllabic scheme of the successive stanzas of *Outskirts*, bearing in mind the order of stresses in the 5-syllable segments and the trochaic rhythm of the 4-syllable ones:

I	II	III	IV	V	VI
8 (5+3)	12 (4+4+4)	8 (4+4)	12 (4+4+4)	10 (5+5)	10 (5+5)
5	12 (4+4+4)	5	10 (4+6)	5	10 (5+5)
8 (5+3)	12 (4+4+4)	8 (4+4)	12 (4+4+4)	5	10 (5+5)
5	12 (4+4+4)	5	10 (4+6)	5	5
10 (5+5)	5	10 (5+5)	12 (4+4+4)	5	5
10 (5+5)		10 (5+5)		5	
5		10 (5+5)		5	
		10 (5+5)			
		10 (5+5)			
		5			

The division of the text into 5- and 4-syllable segments, interchanged within an irregular but emphatic rhythmic pattern, gives the poem the stamp of primitive simplicity, serving in this way the stylization of it as a song strummed with a finger on a mandolin. This stylizing function affects not only on the aural aspect of the text, but also its composition: it emphasizes the casual but coordinated nature of the ties linking the successive segments, suggesting their equivalence, lack of differentiation or hierarchization, and justifies the free inclusion of repeated phrases. All of this creates a disturbing, disharmonious tension when juxtaposed with the

²⁶ The analysis hinges here on the Polish text. To what extent the English version (also by Miłosz) follows the same rhythmic or syllabic pattern, or not, is not the focus of discussion in the current article – Trans.

complex nature of what is being conveyed semantically, the meaning of which extends far beyond the horizons of the suburban scene.

Why then does Miłosz give his poem such a stylized disguise when it is so clearly unsuited to the content?

By hiding his experience of metaphysical mystery and historical terror within the framework of a trivial realistic little scene of manners, by juxtaposing a great theme with an obviously inappropriate, impoverished and depraved form of representation, and at the same time making this dissonance the basic principle on which his poem is constructed, Miłosz protected himself from the uncontrollable dissonance threatening his entire poetic output during the Occupation, in a situation where no poetic form seemed up to conveying the intensity of the pathos and sordidness of the moment, and all great – in their intentions – words can sound false, helpless, banal. Literature was therefore on its guard against such words. Hence its liking for camouflaged constructions already disharmonious in their very assumptions; hence the successful career of the grotesque at the time of the Occupation, feeding on all manner of inappropriate or incongruous inspirations. Hence not a hymn, cantata, ode, rhapsody or chorale – but a SONG (*i.e.* a popular or trivial song: *piosenka* and not *pieśń* – Trans.) *on the end of the world*; or, a poem entitled *Outskirts*.

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THE HYMNIC CODE IN THE POETRY OF CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ

Miłosz's final volume of poetry entitled *Last Poems* (*Wiersze ostatnie*), published more than two years after the poet's death, contains, among the works he wrote after the appearance of *Second Space* (*Druga przestrzeń*, 2002), a short self-commentary dated 2003, which fulfils a double role: that of a prologue to the poet's final works and, at the same time, an epilogue summing up the totality of his literary achievement:

Records of my sense that I am alive, that I breathe. This is what my verses were, hence hymns of gratitude. And alongside this I was conscious of misfortune, of being wounded. And nothing in me was spontaneous, but under the control of the will. (MW 7)¹

The triple use in three consecutive sentences of the verb "to be" in the past tense suggests a consistent division into three separate, though equally important dominant ideas defining the status of Miłosz's entire *œuvre*. We shall begin our examination of these authorial pointers with the final sentence, which addresses

[First appeared in "Pamiętnik Literacki" 2011 issue 2; 35-54]

¹ Abbreviation refers to Czesław Miłosz. 2006. *Wiersze ostatnie*. Zebrała, przepisała i datowanie ustaliła A. Kosińska. Kraków: Znak. The following abbreviations refer to other Polish editions of volumes of poetry by Miłosz: MD = *Druga przestrzeń*, Kraków: Znak, 2002; MN = *Na brzegu rzeki*, Kraków: Znak, 1994; MT = *To*, Kraków: Znak, 2000; MW-1 = *Wiersze*, vol. 1, Kraków: Znak, 1993; MW-2 = *Wiersze*, vol. 2; MW-3 = *Wiersze*, vol. 3. Digits following these abbreviations indicate page numbers; in the case of *Wiersze* volumes 1, 2 and 3, the first digit after the hyphen indicates the volume number and the following one the page number. Published English translations are given where they exist. Translations are taken mostly from Czesław Miłosz. 2001. *New and Collected Poems 1931-2001*. London: Allen Lane, hereafter NACP, followed by page number. The translations are by Czesław Miłosz and Robert Hass, unless otherwise stated in a footnote. As this is a more complete collection than Czesław Miłosz. 2011. *Selected and Last Poems 1931-2004*, New York: HarperCollins, it has been preferred. The latter contains, however, *Last Poems* (translated by Anthony Milosz) and will therefore be used for poems from this final collection, although *nota bene* the lines of self-commentary quoted above do not appear in the translated volume; the translation here is mine. Please also note that the order of the poems in *Last Poems* differs from that of the Polish 2006 edition. Translations of poems from *Druga przestrzeń* are from Czesław Miłosz. 2004. *Second Space: New Poems*. Translated by the Author and Robert Hass. New York: Ecco, hereafter SS, followed by page number. I have preserved the spelling of the translations, which uses American English and therefore sometimes differs from my own spelling elsewhere. Where no published translations are indicated, the translations are my own. These are literal translations intended to illuminate the content for readers of the current article, and make no claim to artistic perfection – Trans.

the status of the artist and the implications flowing from it for the “author’s image” and the position of the lyric subject. In the third sentence, the talk is of ethical status, associated with the moral dilemma that emerges in the process of artistic creation and the “attempt to avoid all these traps of mimesis”² which appear with the artist’s efforts to capture the complexity of reality. At the beginning, on the other hand, a genealogical status is defined, in which hymnicity is intermingled with the experience of Divinity, with the search for sacredness and participation in the religious imagination. This self-characterization directed towards the past highlights point by point three aspects of Miłosz’s work, which should be taken together in the process of trying to comprehend them, since they mutually illuminate and complement one another, and even condition one another. Hence, we cannot speak of the poet’s hymnicity without referring to his consciousness of misfortune; consciousness of misfortune in turn has to be examined in the perspective of the artist’s distancing himself from reality, of artistic creation “under the control of the will.” Clearly, each of these three elements can also be pursued separately, as crucial motifs in Miłosz’s work.

The sentence: “And nothing in me was spontaneous, but under the control of the will” has numerous earlier incarnations and developments in Miłosz’s work, both poetic and non-poetic. In *The Land of Ulro (Ziemia Ulro)* we read, for example: “And how could I make pretensions to ‘sincerity,’ I who go around in a corset, all self-discipline on the inside?”³ In the poem *Evening (Wieczór)* we read the same sense in the cry: “Masks, wigs, buskins, be with me!” (MW-3, 321; NACP 505), and in the title poem of the volume *This (To)* in the challenge: “Writing has been for me a protective strategy/ Of erasing traces” (MT 7; NACP 663). “The poet of this epoch does not expose his face,” “He thinks coldly” (MW-1, 242), Miłosz observed in 1946 in a text entitled *Two in Rome (Dwaj w Rzymie)*. In many of his poems this motif is coupled with irony surrounding the situation of the artist and affecting especially the crucial experience for him of “a contradiction between art and solidarity with one’s fellow men.”⁴ In the poem *Reconciliation (Zgoda)* from *Provinces (Dalsze okolice)* the poet is someone who “maybe [...] does not even have any human feelings” (MW-3, 338; NACP 525). In the same volume, the statement “A good person will not learn the wiles of art” becomes the punch-line of a reflection on the *Notebook* of the poet Anna Kamińska (*Reading the Notebook of Anna Kamińska*, MW-3, 343; NACP 531). In *Second Space (Druga przestrzeń)*, in Part III: *Treatise on Theology (Traktat teologiczny)*, the poet locates in the Hell of artists “people who valued the perfection of their oeuvre/ Over their duties as husbands, fathers, brothers and fellow citizens” (MD 82; SS 61). This concurs with the assertion that “one’s work stands in the stead of happiness [...]” (MN 77; NACP 641) from the poem *In Szetejnie (W Szetejniach)* – or with the following fragment from the poem *Orpheus and Euridice (Orfeusz i Eurydyka)*:

² Aleksander Fiut. 1990. *The Eternal Moment: The Poetry of Czesław Miłosz*, translated by Theodosia S. Robertson. Berkeley and Oxford: University of California Press, 8.

³ Czesław Miłosz. 1985. *The Land of Ulro*. Translated by Louis Iribarne. Manchester: Carcanet, 12.

⁴ Czesław Miłosz. 1991. “The Nobel Lecture.” In *Beginning with My Streets: Essays and Recollections*. Translated by Madeline G. Levine. New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 276.

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. (MW 43; SS 99)

In this and similar records, it is as though an echo of Thomas Mann's *Tonio Kröger* returns, even the very words of the story's protagonist when he declares that, as an artist: "One simply has to be something inhuman, something standing outside humanity, strangely remote and detached from its concerns."⁵ Miłosz quotes these words and comments upon them in his essay *The Immorality of Art* (*Niemoralność sztuki*) in *The Garden of Knowledge* (*Ogród nauk*), observing that:

[...] the poet had to experience how painful it can be for his moral sense to become aware of the fact that his most noble, most human impulses are not his allies, and that his ally is rather his "cold, exacting position" – including when he writes a poem against inhumanity.⁶

In the words of Mann's protagonist, "Our stylistic and formal talent, our gift of expression, itself presupposes this cold-blooded, fastidious attitude to mankind."⁷ In his *Notebook* (*Notatnik*) written in the 1960s, Miłosz, in considering the problem of the moral contradictions of the artistic profession, included words which could be treated as a paraphrase of Tonio Kröger: "Art is born out of the desire for good, but ideas and form require belief in the self, which stems from being enamoured with the dexterity of one's own intellect."⁸

This thread returns in a closely related form in Miłosz's Nobel Lecture:

"Yet to embrace reality in such a manner that it is preserved in all its old tangle of good and evil, of despair and hope, is possible only thanks to a distance, only by soaring *above* it – but this in turn seems then a moral treason."⁹

The need for artistic distance from reality and the requirement to create "under the control of the will" lead in Miłosz to an ethical confrontation since, as we read in *The Garden of Knowledge*, "This whole distance is difficult to accept morally and so the activity which owes everything to it, cannot not be suspect." The perfection of a work of art born as the result of distance and of "moral affliction" understood in this way therefore "has only an aesthetic right to be" and "appears to us as burdened with a certain debt."¹⁰ From here stem, among other things, the traps and paradoxes of the mimetic approach to poetry, as well as the Nobel laureate's need to declare directly at the end of his life: "I was conscious of misfortune, of being wounded." In the poem written immediately after the war *On Birdsong on the Banks of the Potomac* (*Na śpiew ptaka nad brzegami Potomaku*), we could read

⁵ Thomas Mann. 1999. *Death in Venice, Tonio Kröger and Other Writings*. Edited by Frederick A. Lubich; foreword by Harold Bloom. New York: Continuum, 21. The translation of *Tonio Kröger* in this edition is by David Luke.

⁶ Czesław Miłosz. 1986. *Ogród nauk*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 167. This text is not one of *The Garden of Knowledge* essays translated into English by Levine in *Beginning with My Streets* (see footnote 4). Translation is mine – Trans.

⁷ Mann, *Death in Venice, Tonio Kröger and Other Writings*, 21.

⁸ Czesław Miłosz. 1990. *Prywatne obowiązki*. Olsztyn: Pojezierze, 138.

⁹ Miłosz, *Beginning with My Streets*, 276-277.

¹⁰ Miłosz, *Ogród nauk*, 161.

just as directly: “I was the witness of misfortunes” (MW-1, 248); therefore the reader of Miłosz’s later poetry should not be surprised by the declaration earmarked for *Last Poems*. The inclusion of witness to misfortune as one of the three dominant elements of his poetic achievement is justified, however, by its close proximity to the two remaining elements of this self-characterization, and is meant to ensure their appropriate understanding. The author’s confession plays, as it were, in two directions at once: it justifies the “cold, exacting approach” of the modern artist and his activity “under the control of the will,” but it also secures the context for his hymnicity, outside of which the latter might otherwise be misunderstood. The tension that appears in this late, confession-like reckoning is thematized, after all, in Miłosz’s earlier poetry in a number of ways. In the poem written in Warsaw in 1942 entitled *To Poetry* (*Do poezji*) he speaks of mistaking the voice of poetry, which is meant to be “so unlike tangled complaints,” with “the voice of pain, the human voice” (MW-1, 217). Towards the end of *Lauda*, he says – “From a complaint hardly spoken, there grew up thanksgiving” (MW-2, 278; NACP 308)¹¹. In *The Separate Notebooks* (*Osobny zeszyt*): “And I have lived a life that makes me feel unable / To bring myself to write an accusation. / Joy would spurt in amid the lamentation” (MW-3, 67; 377). And in the collection *This* (*To*), “the human voice will not cease to try / To forge a song for terror or glory” (MT 83; NACP 733)¹². Meanwhile a “verse tribute” is accompanied by “black despair,” because “The age had made lament redundant” (MT 37; NACP 691). In one of his last poems, entitled *Arbor Vitae* (*Żywotnik*), he refers to “A huge cathedral [...] being erected, / Made of sighs, shouts, hymns and tears” (MW 22)¹³. Only our perception of the unifying role played by precisely such generic proximity in the tonality and form of expression of Miłosz’s literary art, can determine our appropriate reception of the sentence: “This is what my verses were, hence hymns of gratitude.” But this sentence – a manifesto of an approach that is not only literary, opening up for a reckoning with the artist’s conscience, and inextricably bound up, as I have attempted to show, with the other two elements – interests me above all as an expression of aesthetic reflection, as a summing-up of the entirety of the poet’s own achievements understood from a genealogical perspective.

Miłosz’s late confession confirms beyond doubt the hymnic stance of the voice in his poetry, already overt in his pre-war volume *Three Winters* (*Trzy zimy*), in the poem written in Paris entitled *Hymn*. Moreover, this is not the only direct authorial genealogical qualification of this kind found within the compass of Miłosz’s *œuvre*. He gave his volume of poetry published in 1982 the title *Hymn of the Pearl* (*Hymn o perle*), thus underlining the significance of the poem placed at the beginning of the book with this same title, which is, as the author’s note informs us, “a free adaptation” of an apocryphal text “of Gnostic origin” (MW-3, 7). Awareness of the hymn as a specific verse type is evident in numerous utterances contained in Miłosz’s poems. In *Second Space* we can find almost thirty such metadiscursive statements relating directly to the hymn. Most importantly, the poet’s self-commentary often strives to encompass the totality of his work within a hymnic space;

¹¹ *Lauda* is translated by Czesław Miłosz, Leonard Nathan and Robert Hass.

¹² Translation by Jennifer Scappettone and Martin Sabiniewicz.

¹³ Miłosz, *Last Poems*, 291.

within this framework the hymn becomes a recognizable sign of the author's poetics, assumes in fact the status of a generic category, superior to the formally diverse utterances of individual lines. In this sense Miłosz could be said to return to Ancient Greece, when "the term 'hymn' was used in two senses: both in the narrower sense of a type or sub-category of verse, and in the broader sense of a genre," and when the "generic" application of the term *hymnos* referred in its original meaning to "practically every genre of archaic poetic creativity practiced in the epoch." With time the generic meaning of the word *hymnos* became more and more confined to "lyric songs of praise."¹⁴ The unifying and at the same time totalizing role of the hymn, embracing the whole of Miłosz's work and defining the essence of his poetic experience of the world, may be seen very clearly in one of his last poems, entitled *Heaven (Niebo)*, where the initial lines of the closing stanza refer to the personal life of the poet, the lyric subject of the utterance, as having been a bodily "long journey among people":

If not for them [people], I would have been defenceless; watching them,
I composed hymns

In honor of beech canoes, mirrors of smoothed metal,
aqueducts, bridges and cathedrals.

Everything, which expresses our resemblance

To the Unstated, our Father in heaven. (MW 69)¹⁵

The hymnic "Everything" obviously refers here to the superior Divine order, which determines the choice of verse type. But in the poet's experience this is always complemented by the existence of some "second side," with its characteristic manner of informing us about it as, for example, in the accompanying note entitled *Page 39 (Strona 39)* from *The Separate Notebooks*: "He hears voices but he does not understand the screams, prayers, blasphemies, hymns which chose him for their medium" (MW-3, 76; NACP 386)¹⁶. As Marian Stala rightly points out, "In this poetry despair, bitterness, hope and wonder appear alongside and mutually condition one another."¹⁷ The question arises: how, in fact, should the concept of a hymn be understood in relation to all the metadiscursive statements and direct signals found in Miłosz's verse that suggest affiliation to a particular type or genre? – and how especially, against this background, are other ways of invoking the hymnic tradition realized? Does the hymn exist in this poetry in a non-systemicized form – and if so, how?¹⁸ Between the poem *Hymn* from *Three Winters* and the *Last Poems* we can observe in Miłosz's poetry an extended process of codification, for

¹⁴ Józef Danielewicz. 1986. "Hymn w systemie gatunków liryki greckiej." *Pamiętnik Literacki* 77 (1): 36

¹⁵ Miłosz, *Last Poems*, 298-299.

¹⁶ Translation by Renata Gorczyński (sic) and Robert Hass.

¹⁷ Marian Stala. 2001. *Trzy nieskończoności. O poezji Adama Mickiewicza, Bolesława Leśmiana i Czesława Miłosza*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 170.

¹⁸ The hymn is obviously not the only type of verse or literary genre thematized by Miłosz. The problem of the "thematization of genealogical problems" is discussed by Józef Olejniczak in his article "Gatunek jako temat (przykład Czesława Miłosza)" in Włodzimierz Bolecki and Ireneusz

his own use, of the properties of the hymnic utterance. Clearly, such self-codification is carried out in constant dialogue with codifications that have already been attested historically – against the background of these, it becomes understandable and significant. On the one hand, Miłosz’s hymn takes shape against a background of non-hymns: screams, blasphemies, complaints, accusations, lamentations, laments. On the other hand, the poet’s hymnic space develops through the appropriation and subordination to its own needs of other, related types of verse, including when they appear in to be incapable a given moment of realization. In the poem *Not this Way* (*Nie tak*), for example, “the hymn or psalm [...] falls apart” (MW 2-2, 240; NACP 273)¹⁹. In *Titanic* (*Tytanik*) the orchestra “plays a prayer-hymn” (MW-3, 281). Meanwhile in *Treatise on Theology* (*Traktat teologiczny*) Mickiewicz’s *Ode to Youth* (*Oda do młodości*) is called a “Freemasonic hymn” (“hymn masoński,” MD 75; SS 56). Even the mystery play written by his relative Oskar Miłosz is described by the poet in *Second Space* as a “hymn to the glory of God and man” (MD 97; SS 76). In Czesław Miłosz’s genealogical project, the hymn also has to fulfil an important mission in relation to the whole of literature. Through analogy with questions about the artist’s redemption and the place of his work in this plan, we can see how it is precisely the hymn that forms the basis of and justifies all literary efforts and intentions that arise, as we recall, “under the control of the will” (MW 7). The protagonist of *Biography of an Artist* (*Biografia artysty*) from the volume *Facing the River* (*Na brzegu rzeki*) was “Just not concerned, he promised his soul to Hell/ Provided that his work remained clear and pure” (MN 24; NACP 604). In *Private Duties* (*Prywatne obowiązki*), when the artist is confronted by his dependency described in this way, a more directly expressed doubt appears: “It is said that we do not deserve Hell, because our work atones for our guilt, but perhaps that is yet another sentimental prejudice.”²⁰ In the literary order then, the hymn occupies a position analogous to a work which, in the order of the artist’s life, “atones for guilt”; because his hope and task is to compensate for his distancing, for his elevation of himself above reality, and also for his alliance with the “cold heart” and the “cold, exacting approach” – of which we may be persuaded when we read, for example, the question posed in the poem *Caffé Greco* from *Chronicles* (*Kroniki*):

By what can literature redeem itself
If not by a melopoeia of praise, a hymn
Even unintended? (MW-3, 259; NACP 466)

The hymn becomes something of a synecdoche – a substitute for the poetic voice in general understood as a medium, as it does, for example, in the poem *Evening* (*Wieczór*), in which the following couplet becomes as it were a mini-hymn to the hymn:

O hymn, O palinode, melopoea,
Sing with my lips, you stop and I perish! (MW-3, 321; 505)²¹

Opacki, eds. 2000. *Genologia dzisiaj*. Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2000, 67-76.

¹⁹ Translation by Czesław Miłosz and Lillian Vallee.

²⁰ Miłosz, *Prywatne obowiązki*, 138.

²¹ The of spellings of *melopoeia* and *melopoea* are transcribed here exactly as they appear in the published volume – Trans.

Awareness of the hymn as a verse type, as it appears in poems by Miłosz that thematize problems relating to its genealogy, is fundamentally consistent with theoretical formulations contemporary to him, as well as with conclusions arrived at by literary historical analysis. From the historical perspective, the earliest references for understanding present-day poetic creativity are, in the field that interests us here: antique hymns – with the distinct but important role played by Homeric and Orphic hymns, and later: biblical hymns, under which designation we may include the psalms of praise, as well as mediaeval hymns, or songs of praise representing the chief type of lyric poetry associated with the Church. Still, for Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski, as once for Plato in *The Republic* or *The Symposium*, it was clear that “if divine persons are the object of the praises, then we are speaking rather of hymns, which are praises to God,” as distinct from panegyrics, *i.e.* songs containing “praises not only of people, but also of inanimate objects including, what is more, other living creatures.”²² The hymn was therefore the domain above all of poet-theologians. As Artur Hutnikiewicz observes:

The idea of the hymn is thus also associated since earliest times with the idea of the sacred and the sublime as well as with awareness of the organic link between this type of writing and a religious cult.²³

On the other hand, the poetic hymn which appeared during the Renaissance era and which lacked in subsequent periods any close connection with problems of the sacred, “approximates (provisionally) to those other types of lyric that express praise, such as the ode, paean or dithyramb,” according to some dictionary definitions²⁴. But in ancient times, hymnic creativity – according to Jerzy Schnayder – “is difficult to grasp, since hymns acquired with time a variety of different names (like dithyrambs, paeans, prosody).”²⁵ Crucial difficulties also arise when distinguishing between the hymn and the prayer, a distinction which has become somewhat blurred since mediaeval times and often led to their complete identification within, of course, the general designation of religious lyric. As Jan Józef Lipski concludes, “sometimes, as we know, it is difficult to distinguish the hymn *sensu stricto* from the prayer, the elevated religious or patriotic song, or the ode [...]”²⁶ A similar thing could be said of the distinction between the hymn and the psalm. “The psalm is focused on God, it is a hymn of praise,” Father Józef Sadzik writes in his preface to Miłosz’s Polish translation (from Hebrew) of the *Book of Psalms* (*Księga Psalmów*)²⁷. The “harmony of psalms and hymns” (MT 63) is also mentioned in

²² Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski. 1954. *O poezji doskonałej, czyli Wergiliusz i Homer. (De perfecta poesi, sive Vergilius et Homerus)*. Translated [into Polish from the Latin] by M. Plezia, edited by S. Skimin. Wrocław: Ossolineum, 246-247.

²³ Artur Hutnikiewicz. 1973. *Hymny Jana Kasprowicza*. Warszawa: Państwowe Zakłady Wydawnictw Szkolnych, 39. On the genetic link between the hymn and religious cults, see also: E. Sawrymowicz. 1946. “Hymn jako gatunek literacki.” *Zagadnienia Literackie* 3: 77-78.

²⁴ Małgorzata Semczuk. 1992. “Hymn.” In Alina Brodzka, Mirosława Puchalska and Małgorzata Semczuk, eds. *Słownik literatury polskiej XX wieku*. Wrocław: Ossolinem, 399.

²⁵ Jerzy Schnayder. 1960. “Hymn.” *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich* 1: 141.

²⁶ Jan Józef Lipski. 1975. *Twórczość Jana Kasprowicza w latach 1891-1906*. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 221.

²⁷ Józef Sadzik. 2003. “O ‘Psalmach’.” In Czesław Miłosz. *Księgi biblijne. Przekłady z języka greckiego i hebrajskiego*. Kraków: Znak, 32.

Miłosz's poem *Zdziechowski* (MT 63; NACP 715), in a passage where the poet alludes to the works of this philosopher and former rector of Vilnius University. Another theoretical problem, pointed out by Lipski among others, is the difficulty of distinguishing between the ode and the hymn, while in English-language dictionaries "there is a tendency," according to Lipski, "to define the hymn as a particular type of ode."²⁸ In German theory, there appears the term "hymnic 'lyric of ascent'" which includes the ode and the dithyramb²⁹. In this context, the synonymous uses of various generic terminology to describe verse types in Miłosz's poems cited above – the psalm-hymn, prayer-hymn or even ode-hymn – come as no surprise; while amongst the poet's output we also find odes, as well as numerous references to precisely this generic designation³⁰. Also, *Dithyramb* (*Dytyramb*) occurs twice as the title of a poem – the first time in 1938, the second in the 1965 collection *Bobo's Metamorphosis* (*Gucio zaczarowany*) – a term that in antique definitions refers to a types of verse explained with the aid of the word *hymnos*, which represent a "specialized" type of hymn and yet acknowledge the "superiority of the hymn" over them³¹.

On the basis of an analysis of the metatextual statements contained in Miłosz's poetical texts, especially those where the type designation "hymn" occurs, we may conclude that his use of this designation exceeds or transcends its narrow generic meaning. The poet admits to "having composed hymns in honour of [...] Everything" (MW 69)³², while he describes the totality of his poetic output as "hymns of gratitude" (MW 7). In so doing, he acknowledges to some extent the archaic synonymy between of the scope covered by the concept *hymnos* and poetic creativity in general, yet he certainly uses the term as one denoting genre, in accordance with the earliest Greek tradition, but also surely on the insistence of theoretical and practical problems surrounding the hymn contemporary to himself. The question then arises as to how this consciousness – which can be established on the basis of the authorial "self-commentaries" internal to his verse, and which thus possess the value of theoretical reflections inscribed into the poetry itself, and are even expressed along the lines of a genealogical manifesto – finds confirmation in the hymnographic textual practice of the author of *Unattainable Earth* (*Nieobojęta ziemia*). Discussing the relationship between Miłosz's original poetry and his translations of the Bible, in particular his translations of the Psalms, Jan Błoński (in 1983) noticed his practical fulfilment of the linguistic rules of the hymn on the stylistic level:

In the lexis, syntax, increased use of metonymy, transformations in the idea of poetry (its literariness) – a high hymnic style is constructed, with which the name of the poet will surely be permanently associated.³³

²⁸ Lipski, *Twórczość Jana Kasprowicza*, 235.

²⁹ Lipski, *Twórczość Jana Kasprowicza*, 235. According to Lipski, the term "Lyrik des Aufschwungs" was introduced by the theorist Friedrich Theodor Fischer.

³⁰ See Zbigniew Łapiński. 1985. "Oda i inne gatunki oświecone." In Jerzy Kwiatkowski. *Poznanwanie Miłosza. Studia i szkice o twórczości poety*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 446-457.

³¹ Danielewicz, "Hymn w systemie gatunków liryki greckiej," 43.

³² Miłosz, *Last Poems*, 299.

³³ Jan Błoński. 1998. *Miłosz jak świat*. Kraków: Znak, 212.

This style, according to the understanding presented here, transcends questions of exclusively biblical stylization – even though such stylization has been thought through at the very deepest level – or the effects of the “radiation of an ancient text,”³⁴ even if we accept that biblical translations can fulfil the function of a “poetic laboratory” and thus be what they were, for example, for Jan Kochanowski working on his *Psalter of David* (*Psalterz Dawidów*)³⁵. Suggesting an affinity that goes beyond style between the collections *City Without a Name* (*Miasto bez imienia*, 1969) and *From the Rising of the Sun* (*Gdzie wschodzi słońce i kędy zapada*, 1974) and Miłosz’s *Book of Psalms*, Błoński asks more tentatively, albeit penetratingly: “is it not precisely this that would appear to be the general tendency in Miłosz’s mature work?”³⁶ When Błoński was originally formulating these propositions, he could not have known, of course, of the seven subsequent books of poetry by the Nobel laureate which would confirm his (Błoński’s) critical instincts, but which would also enable the scope for understanding hymnicity in Miłosz’s work to be expanded. Towards the end of the 1990s, after new reading experiences, Błoński points to the scale of this expansion in a quite definite way:

His poetry – especially in the second half of his long life – is an unceasing hymn in praise of existence. But this hymn is sung by so many instruments and in so many different tonalities that the reader – having lost his or her way – often forgets about the object of the hymn in favour of the hymn itself.³⁷

The critic’s consciousness coincides here with the consciousness of the poet in suggesting an equation between poetry (in general) and the hymn. In the meta-poetic confession-hymn entitled *Report* (*Sprawozdanie*) from the collection *Facing the River* (*Na brzegu rzeki*), for example, hymnicity appears to be the very essence of poetic activity; the lyric subject of the poem also uses plural forms, thereby speaking in the name of the whole community of poets and their common “crusade”:

Under compulsion of the desire for the essence of the oak, of the
mountain peak, of the wasp and of the flower of nasturtium.
So that they last, and confirm our hymnic song against death. (MN 6; NACP 590)

Here a thought returns from one of Miłosz’s much earlier texts *Reading the Japanese Poet Issa (1762-1826)* (*Czytając japońskiego poetę Issa (1762-1826)*): “What is pronounced strengthens itself./ What is not pronounced tends to nonexistence” (MW-3, 28; NACP 350) – an idea that coincides moreover with the proposition of another great hymnist, Friedrich Hölderlin: “But what remains is founded by the poets.”³⁸

³⁴ Błoński, *Miłosz jak świat*, 212.

³⁵ Błoński, *Miłosz jak świat*, 213.

³⁶ Błoński, *Miłosz jak świat*, 212.

³⁷ Błoński, *Miłosz jak świat*, 94.

³⁸ “Was bleibet aber, stiften die Dichter.” The statement forms the last line of Hölderlin’s poem *Remembrance* (*Andenken*). Translation is from Martin Heidegger. 2000. *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry*. Translated with an Introduction by Keith Hoeller. Amhurst, New York: Humanity Books, 105. The phrase is also invoked by Józef Sadzik in his discussion of the connections between Miłosz’s ideas and Heidegger (*Inne niebo, inna ziemia*), in Czesław Miłosz. 2000. *Ziemia Ulro*. Kraków: Znak, 21. Sadzik’s text also appears in the Instytut Literacki (Paris) edition of *Ziemia Ulro* (1977), but is omitted from Louis Iribarne’s translation (see footnote 3 above).

The generic meaning of the hymn, which manifests itself so powerfully in Miłosz's later poetry and is especially clearly expressed on the level of metadiscursive statements, requires an examination of its intertextual motivations. The question arises: is the word "hymn" merely an architextual metaphor, stubbornly persisting on the pages of successive volumes of poetry and deliberately archaizing the status of poetry and the poet; or does it also, apart from these functions, open up some kind of wider "*field of genealogical reference*" [my emphases – D.P.]?³⁹ Hence, I am interested in the references made in Miłosz's texts to the hermeneutic space of the hymn in its narrower understanding as a genre, as well as in the identification, precisely within this field, of diverse indexes of genealogical references existing in his poems⁴⁰. I am therefore adopting for the purposes of my further reflections, a direction contrary to the one that has been binding so far. From uncovering the expanding semantic capacity of the concept of the hymn in the poetry under discussion, I wish to move to tracing concrete textual manifestations which point to the hymn as a literary genre. Accumulating generalized data and deducing from it the closeness of the hymn to other genres must now be replaced by the need to establish a "genealogical grammar" specific to the hymn and by an examination of the ways in which it is potentially applied by Miłosz. Because of the theoretical difficulties already mentioned in relation to the hymn, as well as its many-branched history, we should begin with a survey of how the genre was perceived in twentieth-century consciousness. Crucial to this perception is the question of the declining role of formal construction, and as a result of this, of the lack of any possibility of verifying a given, or merely putative generic qualification that depends on a paradigm of construction. Rather a unanimous view seems to prevail that the hymn has become "above all a semantic sign suggesting to the reader a particular type of reception, and referring to the sacred traditions of the genre,"⁴¹ which would also include the sacralization of different objects of poetic expression, or the "constant expansion of the concept of the sacred," thus allowing "almost any theme or content that the author feels to be of crucial value or momentous importance to be recognized as an object suitable for hymnic treatment."⁴² Faced with the unreliability of formal and thematic criteria⁴³, the poet's own gesture becomes decisive in relation to other propositions – the poet, for whom the very choice of the hymn "is a manifestation to some extent of an ideological position, since its salient feature is the position of the lyric subject, who sees the world as a binary structure based on the opposition between the sacred and the profane."⁴⁴ This distinguishing feature remains in accord with the Greek inheritance. Approaching that inheritance with philological precision, Hans Georg Gadamer insisted that a distinction should be made between "praise," in the sense of a eulogy, expressing approval ("pochwała"), and "glorification" ("wysławiania") – and also what stems from this: namely the distinction between a poem expressing praise and a hymn,

³⁹ Stanisław Balbus, *Zagłada gatunków*. In: Bolecki and Opacki, *Geneologia dzisiaj*, 19-32; 27.

⁴⁰ I refer here to the conception of the hermeneutics of literary forms, as presented by Balbus (see note 39).

⁴¹ Semczuk, "Hymn," 400.

⁴² Hutnikiewicz, *Hymny Jana Kasprowicza*, 41.

⁴³ Hutnikiewicz compiles a list of eight possibilities; see *Hymny Jana Kasprowicza*, 43-44.

⁴⁴ Lipski, *Twórczość Jana Kasprowicza*, 236.

because “anyone is not free to praise anyone”; “on the other hand, glorification, like the hymn whose form it is, recognizes something that is absolutely superior, which transcends us and whose presence fulfils us.”⁴⁵

A consequence of the attitude of wonder and distance towards something superior, captured here by Gadamer, are the emotions inscribed in the hymn, reflected in the elevated style but also in its transcendence, exaggeration or simply ecstatic culmination. Ecstasy defines one of the hymnic poet’s modes of behaviour, expresses the emotional engagement of the speaking subject and determines the atmosphere of the verse, which is to be an emanation of the religious “conviction that there exists in the very nature of being some supreme, unchangeable and indestructible value.”⁴⁶ As Hutnikiewicz puts it, “this value, which is felt very directly and powerfully, is portrayed in a tone of ecstatic rapture and humble reverence.”⁴⁷ Ecstasy is without doubt one of the favourite concepts in Miłosz’s dictionary, which means that this element of hymnic diction is given to us directly, formulated already in his poetics, as can be clearly seen in the self-commentary summing up the poet’s creative output in the collection *This (To)*:

And I confess my ecstatic praise of being
Might just have been exercises in the high style.
Underneath was this, which I do not attempt to name. (MT 7; NACP 663)

Miłosz included in *Hymn of the Pearl (Hymn o perle, 1981)* his own adaptations of “ecstatic poems” (MW-3, 83) by Kabir. In the collection *Daylight (Światło dzienne, 1953)*, he speaks of poets who, unlike the “poet of this epoch” – “sought ecstasy in words” (MW-1, 242). But “ecstasy” is above all a designation for meta-textual experiences, as in the poem *Capri*, when it serves to capture “full happiness, ravishment beyond all thought or concern [...]” (MN 13; NACP 585). It belongs among the poet’s most crucial words, because, as in the title poem of the collection *Bobo’s Metamorphosis (Gucio zaczarowany, 1965)*, it designates a fundamental way of experiencing the world: “From childhood to old age ecstasy at sunrise” (MW-2, 135; NACP 193)⁴⁸. In *Second Space*, in *Treatise on Theology*, it becomes a paraphrase for life itself: “There is only our / ecstatic dance, a diminutive part of a great totality” (MD 79; SS 59). The author also exposes its erotic sense and link with desire, like the “ecstatic sign of union” (MT 23; NACP 213) in the collection *This*⁴⁹. Characteristic of Miłosz’s imagination is the interplay of contradictory tones and feelings. Such intermingling of contrasts conditioning the fullness of human experience also affects the state of ecstasy: “I repeated their guttural songs of ecstatic despair walking by the sea” (*Year [Rok]* MW-2, 167; NACP 213)⁵⁰; “Among the shrieks, ecstatic mumblings” [...] (*Fish [Ryba]* MW-2, 220); “Without understanding whence the years of ecstasy and with them the torment” (*Towards the End*

⁴⁵ Hans Georg Gadamer. 2001. *Poetica*. Translated [into Polish from German] by Małgorzata Łukasiewicz. Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 33.

⁴⁶ Hutnikiewicz, *Hymny Jana Kasprowicza*, 44.

⁴⁷ Hutnikiewicz, *Hymny Jana Kasprowicza*, 44.

⁴⁸ Translated by Czesław Miłosz and Richard Lourie.

⁴⁹ The phrase is from the poem entitled *An Honest Description of Myself with a Glass of Whiskey at an Airport, Let Us Say, in Minneapolis*.

⁵⁰ Translated by Czesław Miłosz and Richard Lourie.

of the Twentieth Century [*Pod koniec dwudziestego wieku*] MW-3, 102); “He manages to compile a register of pain, / Reconciliation, bliss, terror and ecstasy” (*Argument*, MW-3, 266); “It is pity and anger because after the ecstasy and despair and hope beings / similar to gods are swallowed by oblivion?” (*On a Beach* [*Na plaży*] MW-3, 367; NACP 559). Ecstatic rapture and an ecstatic tone are immanent in Miłosz’s poetic expression, very often evident in the transcendence of joy by a “contemplative-affirmative shade.”⁵¹ They are apparent in his poetry from the very beginning (to mention only *Hymn* from *Three Winters*) and accompany it to the very end. At the same time it is important to remember that Miłosz’s poetry, as Aleksander Fiut points out, “Combines ecstatic praise of being with the memory of pain and annihilation.”⁵²

What today may still be said to emanate from, or take up, the inheritance of the generic tradition of the hymn is chiefly its hymnicity⁵³, or the special relationship inscribed into the verse between the speaking subject and object of glorification (or praise), and that which is superior, superhuman, Divine, this being a necessary condition for this style of communication. This relationship, fundamentally embedded in the utterance itself, and somehow also preceding it, subsequently finds expression and fulfilment in the various formal and linguistic configurations of the verse. The essence of this relationship, which is of an ideological nature, and which is uttered in a hymnic high style – as indicated by Błoński, can be found in Miłosz on the level of thematics or topoi and poetic semantics. What especially unites the hymnic structure into a whole is the poet’s demonstration of gratitude and acts of thanksgiving. In the succinct self-commentary that forms the prologue to *Last Poems*, as mentioned above, we read: “This is what my poems were, hence hymns of gratitude” Yet in one of his much earlier poems entitled *20th February 1938* (*20 lutego 1938*) we can already observe how the two key concepts come together in the poet’s imagination in a visionary foretelling of the future: “When the hymn of thanksgiving rings out, and the rye of the fields/ Shall be as Divine grace, the salutation of love” (MW-1, 107). A cry for the fulfilment of precisely such a hymn is the verse *Why* (*Dlaczego*) from the volume *Facing the River*: “Why hasn’t it risen, the powerful hymn? Of thanksgiving, of eternal glory?” (MN, 44; NACP 583). Likewise in the poem *Not This Way* (*Nie tak*), “thanksgiving” appears in proximity to a “hymn,” which cannot come into being in the desired form:

And the hymn or psalm of a choirmaster falls apart, only a canticle remains.
My voice always lacked fullness, I would like to render a different thanksgiving.
(MW-2, 240; NACP 273)⁵⁴

In the lines of *Lauda*, “thanksgiving” appears in a position equivalent to “praise” (MW-2, 258-278; NACP 291-308). Even in the bitter poem *Without Reason* (*Bez powodu*) from *Hymn of the Pearl* we find the interjection: “How many acts of giv-

⁵¹ Stala, *Trzy nieskończoności*, 161.

⁵² Aleksander Fiut. 2003. *W stronę Miłozsa*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 53.

⁵³ Understood here as analogy to “elegiacity” (“elegijność”), as discussed by Anna Legeżyńska. 1999. *Gest pożegnania. Szkice o poetyckiej świadomości elegijno-ironicznej*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne.

⁵⁴ Translated by Czesław Miłosz and Lillian Vallee.

ing thanks” (MW-3, 49). The writing of *Treatise on Theology* is described in its opening lines as “simply a thanksgiving” (MD 63; SS 47). In an earlier text, from *Unattainable Earth* entitled *Thankfulness (Dziękczynny)*, we read: “You gave me gifts, God-Enchanter” (MW-3, 236; NACP 449). Expressing what is earthly and human, one’s own life, in categories of a “gift” is a crucial element of the hymnic vision of the world in Miłosz’s poems. An excellent example is the Californian verse entitled *Gift (Dar)*, as well as a much later text, equally clear, entitled *Awakened (Obudzony)*, from the collection *This*: “I realized that this was an undeserved gift and I could not grasp by what grace it was bestowed on me” (MT 39; NACP 693). Or in the opening line of *With Trumpets and Zithers (Na trąbach i na cytrze)*: “The gift was never named. We lived and a hot light created stood in / its sphere” (MW-2, 180; NACP 225). The intertextual trail has to lead us to Jan Kochanowski’s well-known song *What do you want of us, Lord, for your generous gifts (Czego chcesz od nas, Panie, za Twe hojne dary)*, described by scholars as a “famous hymn,” and recognized as the “climax of Old Polish hymnody.”⁵⁵ Apart from the specific poetics of the gift and the establishment of a language of rapture to describe the created world, the motif of directly expressed gratitude also appears in Kochanowski: “Lord, we praise Thee from our grateful hearts.” The next important intertextual reference is in the line: “Thou didst lay the foundations of the vast Earth (nieobeszłej ziemi).”⁵⁶ A paraphrase of this becomes the title of a whole cycle by Miłosz: *Unattainable Earth (Nieobjęta ziemia)* and in so doing furnishes it with a hymnic structural framework. In the emphasis on the “unattainability of the world,” there is a hint of “what transcends us,” described by Gadamer as a condition for the hymn. Besides, Kochanowski’s “vast earth (nieobeszła ziemia)” also appears in Miłosz’s work as a crypto-quotation, in the poem *City (Miasto)*: “And joy, and shame/ To live once more, on the vast earth (na nieobeszłej ziemi)” (MW-1, 140), and in the text entitled *St. Ig. Witkiewicz*: “On the sleepy fields of vast states (nieobeszłych państw)” (MW-1, 187). The poet therefore appeals to the hymnic tradition, clearly exploiting the mediation of Kochanowski, whose poem thereby acquires the value of an archetype of the genre.

We also find in Miłosz’s poetry allusions to classical hymnic structures, stretching back to the Greek tradition. Some of the most important among Miłosz’s hymnic resources are the laudatory elements, which usually take the form of epithets and enumerations. Their most frequent manifestation, however, is the direct use of the noun “praise (chwała)” as well as variants or different grammatical forms of the verb “to praise (pochwalać).” In the poem *Gates of Evening (Bramy wieczoru)*, the laudatory function is amplified even by a triple anaphora:

We praise in the day,
We praise in the night,

⁵⁵ Julian Krzyżanowski. 1964. *Historia literatury polskiej*. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 186.

⁵⁶ Jan Kochanowski. 1976. *Czego chcesz od nas, Panie*, in: *Dziela wszystkie*. Tekst na nowo skolonizowała Barbara Otwińska. Tom 1. Oprac. J. Krzyżanowski. Wyd. 8, 268. There have been several translations of Kochanowski’s poem, I quote here that of Wiktor Weintraub as being close to the original – Trans. See Wiktor Weintraub. 1952. “Kochanowski’s Renaissance Manifesto.” *The Slavonic Review* 30 (74): 412-424.

We praise, when the century ends
and when our generation takes its fragile footsteps (MW-1, 113)

The object of praise is most often God, to whom the phrase “That’s how I praise” (Jakoż ja chwale),” for instance, refers following the children’s singing in the verse entitled *Chagrin* (MW-3, 24). But it is not confined to the poet’s interest in this field, which may be clearly seen, for example, in the later poem *Blacksmith Shop* (*Kuźnia*), where we read the significant declaration: “It seems to me I was called for this: / To glorify things just because they are” (MW-3, 319; NACP 503). The most generalized formulation of poetic duty understood in this way appears in *Second Space*, in inseparable conjunction with a reference to its bitter reverse side, as is customary in Miłosz:

To praise. Only this has been left
To the one who ponders, slowly,
Misfortune upon misfortune and from which side they struck. (MD 43; SS 32)

The keyword “chwała” meaning “praise” or “glory” features in Miłosz’s poetry from the very beginning and embraces the whole of existence. Nature, for example, in *Slow River* from *Three Winters*: “Glory, pain and glory / to the grass, to the clouds, to the green oak wood” (MW-1, 35; NACP 18)⁵⁷. Or people, as in the poem *Year*: “I would have related, had I known how, everything which a single / memory can gather for the praise of men” (MW-2, 167; NACP 213)⁵⁸. “In splendour (W chwale) the earth’s poor moment renews itself,” in “Lecture VI” of *Six Lectures in Verse* (*Sześć wykładów wierszem*) (MW-3, 311; NACP 499)⁵⁹. The calling of humankind, according to the text *Either-Or* (*Albo-Albo*), should be to “publicly testify to the divine glory / With words, music, dance, and every sign” (MW-3, 351; NACP 540). The prayer petition, which has a retrospective orientation, in the collection *This* upholds a similar spirit: “Give me the certainty that I toiled for your glory” (MT 94; NACP 743).

Since the age of Ancient Greece, the verb that is equivalent to the Polish “wysławiać” or “opiewać,” meaning to “glorify,” “extol” or “sing the praises of,” has precisely a hymnic connotation, belonging in the morphology of the hymn to expositional formulations⁶⁰. The use of the verb in both its Polish variants in Miłosz’s poetry should therefore not surprise us: “I want to sing of festivities (opiewać festyny) / The greenwood into which Shakespeare / Often took me” (MW-1, 206; NACP 76)⁶¹; “Only this is worthy of praise (godne opiewania): the day” (MW-2, 126); “Vistula, so extolled in song (opiewana) by inspired rhyme” (MW-1, 142). The poet reaches more often for the verb “sławić” or “wysławiać,” which clearly distinguishes the hymnic from more commonplace forms of praise, a difference which, as we recall, was insisted upon by Gadamer. Already in a juvenile text entitled *2 Stanzas* (*2 strofy*), we read: “So it’s meant for us, to glorify (sławić)

⁵⁷ Translated by Renata Gorczynski (sic).

⁵⁸ Translated by Czesław Miłosz and Richard Lourie.

⁵⁹ Translated by Czesław Miłosz and Leonard Nathan.

⁶⁰ Józef Danielewicz. 1976. *Morfologia hymnu antycznego. Na materiale greckich zbiorów hymnicznych*. Poznań: Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, 66.

⁶¹ Translated by Czesław Miłosz, Robert Hass and Madeline Levine.

beauty” (MW-1, 75). Miłosz opens up the hermeneutic space of the hymn in a variety of ways. A trace of a classical expositional formula may appear, for example, perversely, from the point of view genealogical correctness, in the punch line of a poem, as in the text entitled *Hour (Godzina)*, where the lyric subject appeals to “mortals”: “So that they might praise, as I do, life, that is, happiness” (MW-2, 221; NACP 260). A similar thing occurs in the punch line of the poem *An Alcoholic Enters the Gates of Heaven (Alkoholik wstępuje w bramę niebios)*: “And so it must be, that those who suffer will continue to suffer, / praising your name” (MT 85; NACP 735). In *Return (Powrót)*, almost in the very centre of the poem, the following phrase occurs: “so that the beauty of the earth should be exalted” (MW-3, 370; NACP 563). But in the poem *Rivers*, for a change, everything is as though in its proper place, that is in harmony with the antique morphology of the hymn. “Under various names, I have praised only you, rivers!” (MW-3, 98; NACP 396) – we read in the first line, where there is also an apostrophe, typical of the genre in its Homeric variant, as well as a structural reference to the obligation to mention the name of God, in whose honour the hymn is written⁶².

Among the various methods by which the hymn is made present in Miłosz’s work, one is struck by a special type of metatextual hymnicity. In his poems, the poet alludes to hymns by other authors, cites them, comments on them, and introduces their titles into the compass of his own text. In the poem *Titanic (1912) (Tytanik (1912))*, from the volume *Chronicles (Kroniki)*, after the line “Here are the words of the hymn played by the Titanic’s orchestra” (MW-3, 282), there follows an 8-line quotation (the first 4 lines and last 4 lines), in the English original, from the song *Autumn* from a collection of hymns of the American Episcopalian Church, which was supposed to have been sung – according to some sources – at the time of the catastrophe. In *Second Space*, critical reflection on certain hymns is built into the verse:

An astonishing “Hymn for the Annunciation of the Holy Lady Mary” was written by the young anticlerical Mickiewicz a short time before his Freemasonic hymn known as “Ode to Youth.” He glorified Mary in the words of the prophet, *i.e.*, Jakob Boehme. (MD 75; SS 56)

In turn, in the poem entitled *Heavenly (Niebiańskie)* from *Last Poems*, we learn that “The poet William Blake [...] as he lay dying, sang triumphal hymns” (MW 49)⁶³. In the volume *Unattainable Earth*, Miłosz includes several translations from Walt Whitman, regarded as a creator of the modern hymnic lyric, examples of which are certainly Miłosz’s translations of the texts *We Two, How Long We Were Fool’d (My dwoje)* and *As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life (Kiedy ocean życia zabierał mnie w odpływie)*. In the volume *Facing the River*, Miłosz, this time in his subjective role of translator of Polish literature, records his recognition of the “parahymnic” features of Anna Świrszczyńska’s poetry – in the poem *Translating Anna Swir on an Island of the Caribbean (Tłumacząc Annę Świrszczyńską na wyspie Morza Karaibskiego)*:

⁶² Danielewicz, *Morfologia hymnu antycznego*, 66.

⁶³ Miłosz, *Last Poems*, 317.

And indeed, by 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. (MN 28; 598)

In the poem *Toast* from *Daylight* (*Światło dzienne*), the poet alludes to Juliusz Słowacki's narrative poem *Beniowski* (1841) – an allusion whose hymnic sense appears to embrace, despite the intertextual address, not so much this one specific text but Słowacki's entire poetic output, according to the principle of *pars pro toto*:

Under their breath they sing the hymn of the great man
Whose spirit after death, as he promised, triumphs. (MW-1, 301)

The recurrence of the hymnic code is one of the overall unifying factors in Miłosz's poetry. Points of reference to this code are scattered throughout his work in many different places, and operate with varying degrees of intensity. They take many forms, often provoking semantic interaction with other genealogical fields. In addition to these dispersed points of reference unifying his writing into some kind of hymnic whole, as well as similarly scattered references to the hermeneutic space of the poet's preferred genre, we encounter in Miłosz's volumes of poetry, texts which demand to be called hymns in the more precise sense of the term, trying to realize themselves in the classicist way, as proper generic paradigms. One of the best known and most frequently commented upon is the poem *Hymn* from *Three Winters*, already supplied with the author's generic qualification. Described by researchers as "juvenilia," it is nevertheless of exceptional importance in understanding Miłosz's whole output, since it is this and no other genre that foreshadows the future character of the poet's total achievement, available now today. As Marek Zalewski observes:

[...] in *Hymn* we find almost the ready-made world of Miłosz: delight in the beauty of the world and the sense of the transitoriness of any order, a taste for ultimate things, problems with the sinful *ego*, an apocalyptic view of events – a gaze capable of grasping reality in its highest form.⁶⁴

The poet himself was aware of the significance of this poem for his whole achievement, as he put it in an interview: "[...] *Hymn* does reveal some of my basic tendencies. For me there are constants: on the one hand, an inclination to ecstasy, to union with the world of things, a desire to experience everything, to touch, to be in the stream of life, and, at the same time, a negative anxiety."⁶⁵ In the poet's self-interpretation, the motif of ecstasy often recurs – he speaks of: "the ecstasy of union with God, who is also the world," "*Hymn* is [...] on the side of ecstasy with the world."⁶⁶ Kris Van Heuckelom, in his interpretation of *Hymn*, draws attention

⁶⁴ Marek Zaleski. 2005. *Zamiast. O twórczości Czesława Miłosza*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 122.

⁶⁵ Renata Gorczyńska (pseud. Ewa Czarnicka) and Aleksander Fiut. 1987. *Conversations with Czesław Miłosz*. Translated by Richard Lourie. San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 109.

⁶⁶ Gorczyńska, *Conversations*, 108-109.

to the ecstatic nature of the lyric subject's utterance⁶⁷. Zaleski, on the other hand, notices another crucial feature of the text: "The temporal constructions used in the verse transport the events into a mythical, static *praesens*."⁶⁸ Renata Gorczyńska expresses a similar perception: "*Hymn* is an ahistorical work, since it contains no references to a specific time."⁶⁹ These observations only confirm how thoroughly and deliberately Miłosz refers to the hymnic code and enable us to grasp their next important feature. For typical of the genre is the "metaphysical always and everywhere,"⁷⁰ in which the lyric subject of the hymn finds itself. Typical of antique hymns was the application of the so-called timeless *praesens*⁷¹, suggesting constant preoccupation with the described activity.

Other works by Miłosz, not already supplied with the author's generic qualification, may also be designated as hymns. One poem that certainly can be is *Rivers* from the collection *Hymn of the Pearl*:

Under various names, I have praised only you, rivers!
You are milk and honey and love and death and dance.
From a spring in hidden grottoes, seeping from mossy rocks
Where a goddess pours live water from a pitcher,
As clear streams in the meadow, where rills murmur background,
Your race and my race begin, and amazement, and quick passage. (MW-3, 98; NACP 396)

Marian Stala calls *Rivers* a hymn that is "ecstatic and meditative at the same time [...]":

The river here is not only an image of the fullness of being, understood dynamically, reconciling contradictions; it is also an image of concrete human existence, experienced internally, from an indefinite beginning to an enigmatic end, experienced – in all the registers of existence.⁷²

What is important here for the hymnic perspective, from which we are examining the poem, is that "The ultimate consequence of this experience is the feeling of going beyond time, of liberation from its power [...]."⁷³ The final two lines of the poem speak directly about this:

While your endless flowing carries us on and on;
And neither is nor was. The moment only, eternal. (MW-3, 99; NACP 397)

Very much a classical hymn, appealing to the antique tradition, is the poem entitled *A Goddess (Bogini)* from the cycle *Lithuania, After Fifty-two Years (Litwa po pięćdziesięciu dwóch latach)*:

⁶⁷ Kris Van Heuckelom. 2004. "*Patrzeć w promień od ziemi odbity.*" *Wizualność w poezji Czesława Miłosza*. Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 46.

⁶⁸ Zaleski, *Zamiast*, 123.

⁶⁹ Renata Gorczyńska (pseud. Ewa Czarnecka). 1992. *Podróżny świata. Rozmowy z Czesławem Miłoszem. Komentarze*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 240. The citation is from *Komentarze*, not included in the published English translation (see footnote 60 above).

⁷⁰ Hutnikiewicz, *Hymny Jana Kasprowicza*, 43.

⁷¹ Danielewicz, *Morfologia hymnu antycznego*, 16.

⁷² Stala, *Trzy nieskończoności*, 175.

⁷³ Stala, *Trzy nieskończoności*, 176.

Gaia, first-born daughter of Chaos,
 Adorned with grasses and trees, gladdens our eyes
 So that we can agree when naming what is beautiful
 And share with all earthly wanderers our joy.
 [...]
 Gaia! Whatever happens, preserve at least your seasons.
 Emerge from under the snows with the trickling of rivulets in springs [sic, spring: na
 wiosnę – Trans.].
 Dress yourself for those who will live after us
 If only in the green of mid-city parks
 And the blossoming of dwarf apple trees in the garden plots at the edge of cities.
 I depose my petition, your lowly son. (MN 16-17; NACP 591).

Here the very choice of the addressee of the hymn leaves us in no doubt: “the same Earth which, as they say, is a goddess,” (MW-3, 327; NACP 511), to use the highly appropriate conclusion to the poem entitled *Incarinated* (*Wcielony*) from *Provinces* (*Dalsze okolice*). Apart from the expository formula indicating the name of the goddess at the beginning of the text, this exposition also contains the traditional “genealogical reference” (“first-born daughter of Chaos”) practised, for example, in Orphic literature of “miniature forms” (without its development into a myth of origins)⁷⁴. The poem fulfils several hymnic functions: expository, laudatory, illustrative (I refer here also to fragments omitted from the above quotation due to their length, but which may be regarded as equivalent to the *pars media* of the antique hymn). The whole poem ends, in accordance with the morphology of Callimachus, with a final petition. Expressed as good-natured litotes, it acquires in Miłosz’s rendition a distinctly ironic tone.

A separate group of Miłosz’s hymns are his prayer-hymns. The distinction between the hymn and the prayer is one of the most problematic points in the theory of both genres, as well as in interpretational practice. With reference to antique hymnody, there are three basic distinguishing features. First, prayer petitions contained in the structure of Homeric hymns are of a conventional nature and do not emerge from a context preceding the content of the petition – which means that they should be distinguished from the spontaneous position of a praying subject. Prayer petitions are also not obligatory in such hymns. Second, the antique hymn does not fulfil two typical functions of prayer: the hypomnetic and the votive (which is not so say, of course, that traces of these functions do not appear in hymns at all). Third and finally – in a prayer, the emotional emphasis is on the subject uttering the prayer, whereas in the hymn it is on the addressee⁷⁵. In speaking of prayer-hymns, we are not so much seeking to blur conceptually the above-mentioned differences, as to demonstrate the poet’s reference to yet another realm of literary tradition. On the one hand, the closest tradition indicated here is that of the psalms, and on the other hand – mediaeval church lyric poetry, where the hymn is called a liturgical song of praise. A model example of the revival of this tradition in Miłosz’s poetry is the text *Veni Creator* from the volume *City Without a Name* (*Miasto bez imienia*, 1969):

⁷⁴ Danielewicz, *Morfologia hymnu antycznego*, 70.

⁷⁵ Danielewicz, *Morfologia hymnu antycznego*, 34, 80-81.

Come, Holy Spirit,
 bending or not bending the grasses,
 appearing or not above our heads in a tongue of flame,
 at hay harvest or when they plough in the orchards or when snow
 covers crippled firs in the Sierra Nevada.
 I am only a man: I need visible signs.
 I tire easily, building the stairway of abstraction.
 Many a time I asked, you know it well, that the statue in church
 lifts its hand, only once, just once, for me.
 But I understand that signs must be human,
 therefore call one man, anywhere on earth,
 not me – after all I have some decency –
 and allow me, when I look at him, to marvel at you. (MW-2, 177; NACP 223)⁷⁶

A sign that Miłosz was inscribing himself into the mediaeval tradition is the title itself of the poem, repeating a hymn title that was preserved in many different versions of it. As Leonard Neuger demonstrates, Miłosz “after powerful and ostentatious signals indicating his sources,” then resigns from a realization of the generic model. In this text, we are dealing rather with the “barely feigned structure of a hymn,” the proof of which is, among other things, the “drastic reduction of imperatives (petitions) and the complete lack of attributes expressed *explicite* of the Addressee of the prayer.”⁷⁷ Miłosz, as Neuger shows in his thorough analysis, takes over only the basic structure of the hymn. He begins and ends with almost-quotations, but in fact reflects on what was “mentioned only in passing, as a supplement” in the model mediaeval hymn (*i.e.* the question of the “manifestation of the presence of the Holy Spirit through signs”). The poet upholds at the same time “the hymnic tension between what is anthropological and what is theological.”⁷⁸ Miłosz’s poem *Veni Creator* is therefore, from the genealogical point of view, a “conversation with the hymn” or even “a conversation within the hymn.”⁷⁹ In turn, Neuger suggests treating the poem *A Confession* (*Wyznanie*) from the volume *Chronicles* as a “facetious replica” of *Veni Creator*.⁸⁰ Aspects of prayerful hymnicity also appear across the poet’s work in more scattered or dispersed forms, intermingled with other types of poetic expression.

An original aspect, for example, is the relationship between hymnicity and epiphany. For Jan Błoński, poetic epiphany is brought about by the “once only-ness” (“jednorazowość”) of an experience, *i.e.* by an experience that happens once and once only – “moments of revelation” are held to be hidden in “specific, concrete sensory experiences.”⁸¹ For Aleksander Fiut, “the encounter with the concrete in Miłosz’s poetry, resembles an epiphany but is qualitatively differently from it.” According to Fiut, “The ecstasy of the particular does not bring an epiphany,” because “an incomprehensible meaning is revealed to the poet.” “Imperfect epiphanies,” which stop in reality at the insurmountable frontier of the “moments

⁷⁶ Translated by Czesław Miłosz and Robert Pinsky.

⁷⁷ Leonard Neuger. 2000. “*Veni Creator* Czesława Miłosza. Próba lektury.” In *Poznawanie Miłosza 2. Cz. 1: 1980-1998*, edited by Aleksander Fiut. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 233.

⁷⁸ Neuger, “*Veni Creator* Czesława Miłosza,” 235.

⁷⁹ Neuger, “*Veni Creator* Czesława Miłosza,” 232.

⁸⁰ Neuger, “*Veni Creator* Czesława Miłosza,” 243.

⁸¹ Błoński, *Miłosz jak świat*, 57-60.

just before revelation,” are therefore granted rather by the process leading up to this “moving frontier” and not by its fulfilment. Such existential experiences, in Fiut’s opinion, nevertheless “bear traces of their religious origin” – they are not merely “components of an aesthetic theory.”⁸² Ryszard Nycz likewise observes the rather traditional character of Miłosz’s epiphanies, noting that “they never seem to lose contact with the theological genealogy of this category, nor with the sacral foundation of the search for the meaning of existence.”⁸³ One has to agree furthermore with another opinion of Nycz, that “epiphany in Miłosz’s work is neither direct self-revelation, nor pure technique.”⁸⁴ In other words, we have to recognize that in the poetic – and especially modernist – poetic record, the moment of epiphany is inevitably linked to the aesthetic moment. Because, as Umberto Eco reveals:

[...] the source of pleasure is no longer the fullness of objective perception, but the subjective choice of a certain trivial moment of experience, its transference into stylistic form, the formulation of a linguistic equivalent of reality.⁸⁵

Another important point – for the hymnic perspective that interests us here – is that Miłosz’s epiphanic texts arise from rapture and are an expression, often ecstatic, of admiration for the “visible world,” and yet a kind of sacral *residuum* is preserved in them at the same time. Such poetic records, in the form of countless fragments of diverse length, are interwoven into the fabric of Miłosz’s work. There are whole poems, however, which I would willingly call epiphanic hymns, though an elegiac tone also filters through between the lines. Among these, there is above all the poem *Notebook: Bon by Lake Geneva* (*Notatnik: Bon nad Lemanem*) with its obvious allusion to Psalm 137 (verse 5: “If I forget you, O Jerusalem,” MW-2, 23) and final “Yes” directed towards the “eternal moment” with its intensely epiphanic depiction of autumn. Another example might be the peculiar epiphany of fire and simultaneous praise of life in the poem *Mittelbergheim*, which begins with a description that “makes present” the lyric subject’s personal experience:

Wine sleeps in casks of Rhine oak.
I am awakened by the bell of a chapel in the vineyards
Of Mittelbergheim. I hear a small spring
Trickling into a well in the yard, a clatter
Of sabots in the street. Tobacco drying
Under the eaves, and ploughs and wooden wheels
And mountain slopes and autumn are with me. (MW-1, 331; NACP 104)

– and culminates in an apostrophe to the superhuman element and affirmative double incantation:

Fire, power, might, you who hold me
In the palm of your hand whose furrows

⁸² Fiut, *The Eternal Moment*, 27-28.

⁸³ Ryszard Nycz. 2001. *Literatura jako trop rzeczywistości*. Kraków: Universitas, 168-169.

⁸⁴ Nycz, *Literatura jako trop rzeczywistości*, 169.

⁸⁵ Umberto Eco. *Poetyka Joyce’a*. Translated [into Polish] by M. Kośnik. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo KR, 61-62.

Are like immense gorges combed
 By southern wind. You who grant certainty
 In the hour of fear, in the week of doubt,
 It is too early, let the wine mature,
 Let the travelers sleep in Mittelbergheim. (MW-1, 331-332; NACP 105)⁸⁶

The divine attributes of the addressee of this fragment give the final incantation the character of a prayer petition. The lyric subject's experiences range from fear to devotion and admiration. In this glorification, the condition mentioned by Gadamer is also fulfilled – as experience is transformed into the artistic form of the hymn: “the recognition of something absolutely superior, which transcends us and whose presence fulfils us.” Miłosz's epiphanizations of space coupled with his subjective states of rapture, I would call, somewhat figuratively, epiphanic hymns, thereby referring to some very distant chapters in the history of the genre⁸⁷. On a similar, metaphorical basis, it is possible to link this category to yet another hymnic situation in Miłosz's poetry, namely his many attempts – described in various ways by critics – to recreate in language, in the poetic word, fragments of past reality⁸⁸. As Zaleski observes, “Miłosz's word wants to be a hymnic word, it wants to extol what 'is' and resurrect what was,” but it remains, in Zaleski's opinion, only an “epitaph to emotions,” since it “cannot summon out of non-existence, do justice to what was.”⁸⁹ Let us add, however, that this process of “enshrining in marble” is independent of the intentions of the poetic gesture. The hymnist is fulfilled after all in the carrying out of his task (not in its fulfilment), when he responds to what he is called to do. “Hymnically, I call to you all and remind you” (MW-3, 38) – declares the lyric subject of Miłosz's poem *Leave Me Alone* (*Odstąp ode mnie*). This declaration describes in short the poetic model that begins to dominate in the late poetry of the author of *This* (*To*). For Miłosz's word indeed wants to be hymnic, especially in moments where we might expect rather a lament or elegy, and where he even comes close to expressing directly the vanity of all Orphic efforts. This is already the case in the collection *From the Rising of the Sun* (*Gdzie wschodzi słońce i kędy zapada*), in the pages of *The Separate Notebooks* (*Osobny zeszyt*) and, obviously, in many of the texts from *Chronicles*. An excellent example of hymnicity conceived in this way is the poem entitled *My Grandfather Sigismund Kunat* (*Mój dziadek Zygmuny Kunat*) from the collection *This*, or *A Polka-dot Dress* (*Suknia w groszki*) from *Facing the River*, or *A Beautiful Stranger* (*Piękna nieznajoma*) from *Second Space*.

The notion of the hymn in Miłosz's poetry transcends the boundaries of poet-

⁸⁶ Translated by Czesław Miłosz and Richard Lourie.

⁸⁷ See Danielewicz, *Morfologia hymnu antycznego*, 43-64. The main feature of the epiphanic hymns of Callimachus, which had “already completely lost any connection with cultic ritual” (43), is, according to Danielewicz, their “making present” or “appearing to make present the represented world” (64). The hymnist's technique depended on the mimetic recreation of cultic ceremonies (reconstruction of a modal framework), introducing the element of “the presence of the very god,” as a result of an epiphany – the revelation of the deity itself.

⁸⁸ Ryszard Nycz. 1984. *Sylwy współczesne. Problem konstrukcji tekstu*. Wrocław: Ossolineum, 56. Nycz proposes, for example, an interpretation of this feature of Miłosz's poetry in categories of *anamnesis* (reminiscence). On this topic, see also Zaleski, *Zamiast*, 171-191.

⁸⁹ Zaleski, *Zamiast*, 240.

ics. For hymnicity arises out of the experience of the sacred, “of what transcends us,” which determines the position of the poet and at the same time names the experience itself. Independently of its formal and artistic meanings, it provides succour for the eschatological imagination, as for example, in the ecstatic vision of the Kingdom of Heaven in *Gate of the Morning* (*Brama poranku*, 1938):

Constant whispers of hymns of adoration,
interweaving long garlands of flowers and fruit,
glitter of dances, quite unlike the rhythm of amatory relations (MW-1, 115)

In *A Poem On Frozen Time* (*Poemat o czasie zastygłym*, 1933), the hymn proved to be the best place for translating aesthetic tasks into social intention and became a source of prophetic power drawn from within the catastrophic vision that was then fulfilling itself, and yet allowed the germ of a positive transformation of the world to be plucked from it:

I watch, I listen.
In order to extract forms, worthy of the time of my sons,
in order to weigh up in my palm the shining disk of the most beautiful hymns
And cast it
Into fields of mist, into the boom of waterfalls of the future. (MW-1, 82-83).

In addition to the poetic power of the hymn, reminiscences of war emerge metaphorically from the poem *Reminder* (*Przypomnienie*, 1947): “And brief hymns of bullets were played in serial bursts” (MW-1, 272). Hymnicity appears above all, however, as an existential project, an imperative of existence, a life model offering no alternative directed, for example, at the “young,” as in the poem from the collection *Provinces* entitled in Polish *Dalsze okolice*, but translated as *A New Province*: “They should greet a sunrise with hymns,/ Compose every day a song of songs” (MW-3, 341; NACP 528). It describes a mythical time in the past: “We lived every day in hymn, in rapture,/ Not finding words, just feeling it is too much” (MW-3, 324; NACP 508)⁹⁰. Miłosz’s “life in hymn” reminds us again of Hölderlin and his famous line “yet poetically, man dwells on this earth.” “To dwell poetically” means here, according to Heidegger: “to stand in the presence of gods and to be struck by the essential nearness of things. Existence is ‘poetic’ in its ground – which means, at the same time, as founded (grounded), it is not something earned, but is rather a gift.”⁹¹ “For to exist on the earth is beyond any power to name,” Miłosz might add with a line from his poem *Report* (*Sprawozdanie*) from *Facing the River* (MN 6; NACP 589-590). Although in his work, of course, it is above all the existence of the lyric subject that is poetic, an existence whose nature is accurately described by Nycz:

As one of the elect [...] he lives poetically: between heaven and earth, far-removed from society and “disinherited of prophecies,” he fulfils his mediumistic calling [...], devoting his speech to the service of praising the “voices of poor people” and the “unnamed.”⁹²

⁹⁰ The quotation is from *Linnaeus*, also in *Provinces*.

⁹¹ Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry*, 60.

⁹² Nycz, *Sylwy współczesne*, 57.

Analysing the poems of Czesław Miłosz, we may conclude that literary form gives a name to experience, which in turn demands literary form, seeks and – with varying success – verifies the possibility of a genuine coming into being. And it is precisely this rather complicated interconnection that best defines the character of Miłosz's entire *corpus hymnicum*.

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MIŁOSZ'S VOICE IN THE CONTROVERSY
OVER "INCOMPREHENSIBILITY":
ON THE HIDDEN INTERTEXTS
OF "AGAINST INCOMPREHENSIBLE POETRY" AND "POSTSCRIPTUM"

Czesław Miłosz never concealed the fact that he wished to influence the development of Polish lyric poetry, to review and to participate in decisions that would determine its present and future form. Many times and in an openly engaged manner he prompted choices, admonished and reprimanded, and introduced models worthy of imitation in anthologies edited by himself. He gathered and sowed the seed, as he put it, for the healthiest "cultivation of Polish poetry."¹ His essays devoted to American and other English-language poetry: *A Semi-Private Letter about Poetry* (*List półprywatny o poezji*, 1958), *A Treatise on Poetry* (*Traktat poetycki*, 1957), *Private Obligations* (*Prywatne obowiązki*, 1974), *The Witness of Poetry* (*Świadectwo poezji*, 1983), and also his activities as a translator are the best examples of those endeavours. The author who spoke of an avalanche that changed its course according to the stones encountered on its way believed that even individual activities, provided they were consciously undertaken, could influence a change in the most rigid circumstances, including the immovable aspects, or so it seemed, of contemporary poetry-writing. He himself never resigned from such aspirations even in the later period of his creativity. But did he really change? And if he did, how much so? To what extent do the elderly poet's mature manifestos, which arose at a time when modernist culture had entered a critical phase, correspond to the evolution of his own writing, as well as to his earlier views on the obligations of lyric poetry, formulated, as we know, above all in his polemical relationship with avant-garde movements? I shall try to answer this question through a careful reading of two late essays, which are clearly continuations of Miłosz's earlier contributions to the creation of a poetic programme.

In 1990 the author of *A Semi-Private Letter* published two articles on modern poetry in the literary journal *Teksty Drugie* entitled *Against Incomprehensible Po-*

[First appeared in *Pamiętnik Literacki* 2011 issue 2; 55-74]

¹ Czesław Miłosz, ed. 2000. *Wypisy z ksiąg użytecznych*, [selected and translated with commentary by Czesław Miłosz]. Kraków: Znak, 7.

etry (*Przeciw poezji niezrozumiałej*) and *Postscriptum*². The first of these had also appeared a little earlier in the weekly magazine *Tygodnik Powszechny* (1990, number 21) and arose, as the author reveals, originally as the introduction to an anthology of foreign-language poetry compiled by himself and consisting of his own translations. The problems raised in this text were later reflected in the foreword to the first edition of his *Selections from Useful Books* (*Wypisy z ksiąg użytecznych*, 1994) and also in his short introductions to subsequent parts of this anthology³. The attentive reader of *Against Incomprehensible Poetry* cannot but be drawn to its title, respecting the poetics of a literary critical philippic and immediately recalling one of the most important polemical debates of the twenty-year interwar period (1919-1939), namely the controversy over "incomprehensibility" launched by the notorious pronouncements of Karol Irzykowski (1874-1944). In 1908 Irzykowski wrote a text, later included in his volume *Action and Word* (*Czyn i słowo*, 1913), entitled *The Incomprehensibles: A Theory of Incomprehensibility Expounded as Comprehensibly as Possible* (*Niezrozumalcy. Teoria niezrozumiałości, o ile można, zrozumiale wyłożona*), and then some years later, on 21 September 1924 in the newspaper *Wiadomości Literackie* (number 38), published a further article, highly critical of apologists of experimental form, entitled *Incomprehensibility* (*Nierozumialstwo*). He provoked numerous polemical reactions. In subsequent issues of the newspaper several writers and critics presented a united front of opposition to the views expressed by Irzykowski: Jerzy Hulewicz, Maria Jehanne Wielopolska, Jan Nepomucen Miller, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, and also Józef Ujejski, who made use of a previously unpublished article by the nineteenth-century poet Cyprian Kamil Norwid, entitled *Clarity and Obscurity* (*Jasność i ciemność*), treating Norwid as a voice in the discussion and supplying only a short commentary of his own. Finding himself under attack, Irzykowski retaliated with the text *Inter augures: The Weak Response of a Cornered Prig* (*Inter augures. Słaba odpowiedź osaczonego zarozumialca*), reconciling himself to some of the accusations made against him and characteristically trying to work out a compromise. The earlier bitter dispute then lost its intensity, but – as tends to happen in such cases – continued to smoulder, reappearing in various programmatic utterances of advocates or opponents of avant-garde, experimental and difficult or demanding literary form. The controversy over incomprehensibility acquired historical significance only after World War II when, following the political and cultural Thaw of October 1956, the literary critical scene immediately became defined by the "new" but no less stormy polemics between the "romantics" and the "classicists,"

² Czesław Miłosz. 1990. "Przeciw poezji niezrozumiałej" [and] "Postscriptum." *Teksty Drugie* 5-6: 151-162; 162-176, henceforward referred to in the text in round brackets as PP and P respectively followed by page number. Quotations from *Against Incomprehensible Poetry* are taken from: Czesław Miłosz. 2001. *To Begin Where I Am: The Selected Essays*, translated with an introduction by Bogdana Carpenter and Madeline G. Levine. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 373-387; henceforward AIP followed by page number. I have been unable to locate a published English translation of *Postscriptum* – Trans.

³ Miłosz also included elements of this discussion in the Introduction to his English-language anthology *A Book of Luminous Things: An International Anthology of Poetry* (San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace, 1996) together with a separate extract closely based on part of *Against Incomprehensible Poetry* entitled "Epiphany."

which focused above all on “vision” and “levelling.”⁴ Although the debate now revolved around new problems and categories, it still concentrated on questions of imagination and truth, and was to a certain extent a reflection or extension of the interwar dispute. I say: reflection, because the initiator of the new debate, Jerzy Kwiatkowski, sets out from assumptions which in part map onto the position of the “incomprehensibles” criticized by Irzykowski. Let us return, however, to Czesław Miłosz’s articles published at the beginning of the 1990s.

In *Against Incomprehensible Poetry*, Miłosz reactivates, as though in passing, the broad context stretching back to the beginning of the interwar years, and alludes to a whole flood of associations, problems and attitudes, which the participants in the dispute over incomprehensibility presented in their creative work. Excited by this discovery, the reader then establishes to his or her surprise that the poet mentions neither Irzykowski nor his opponents in this text. One explanation may be that Miłosz had in mind, when he was compiling his anthology, not only Polish but also American or European readers, who were unfamiliar with the history of Polish literary polemics. However, this does not explain everything. The poet’s silence, as I shall attempt to demonstrate, was not without its consequences.

Miłosz knew perfectly well, however, that his speaking through someone else’s voice and making use of ideas already loaded with meanings and connotations, would not be missed by the Polish reader, at least not by the better informed one, and that no effort would be spared to establish the people and meanings referred to in the text and left unexplained.

It pays to inquire into such references – pays to establish the stakes in the intellectual game which Miłosz conducts with the reader. To my mind, the game is played out on at least two levels. On the one hand, it underlines the fact that the choices made by the poet himself before 1939 remained unchanged, including in the entirely different context in which literature found itself at the end of the twentieth century. It therefore demonstrates the complete philosophical and aesthetic identity between the young and the elderly Miłosz. The poet liked to emphasize this identity, and did so many times in his works. On the other hand, concealing the people and ideas to whom he refers serves to advance a definite thesis, which Miłosz formulates as much in the literary historical order as in the ideological one.

In order to bring to light these two levels of the intellectual game conducted by Miłosz in his article *Against Incomprehensible Poetry*, four specific questions need to be considered. We need to establish: first, what Miłosz understands by “incomprehensible poetry”; second, against whom or against what he writes this new text which bears all the hallmarks of a manifesto; third, to whom among those who used the notion of “incomprehensibility” (“niezrozumialstwo” or “niezrozumiałość”) in the earlier controversy Miłosz seems the closest; and fourth and finally, what literary historical – and at the same time ideological – thesis he puts forward in this article written in a new and fundamentally different era.

Obviously, all these questions are closely bound up with each other. Here I shall concentrate above all on the three initial questions, outlining the fourth only where essential. I shall begin by addressing the second question.

⁴ I discuss these polemics in detail in my book: Agata Stankowska. 1998. *Kształt wyobraźni. Z dziejów sporu o “wizję” i “równanie.”* Kraków: Universitas.

Miłosz, as if he were writing a well-structured manifesto, clearly specifies the negative protagonist of his own choices: “modern” or “innovative” poetry (“poezja nowoczesna”). Let us add at once that he means its main stream, exemplified above all, according to Miłosz in *Postscriptum*, by the lyric poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé, Francis Ponge and Wallace Stevens. Miłosz identifies its main characteristics as extreme subjectivity, lack of interest in the object, and making the autonomy of the work the chief principle of the creative process. He then accuses “modern poetry” of “incomprehensibility,” seeing this as the result of its self-isolation, its fencing itself off from those who are not “called,” of its “being sterile, tending toward purely formal exercises” (PP 155; AIP 379). His aversion, accompanied – so he claims – by purely “intellectual” (or “cerebral”) recognition, is motivated by his conviction that the tragedy of the human lot should not allow the magnificent self-sufficient structure of language, which is indifferent to suffering, to be acceptable as the only element and guiding principle of poetry-writing. Here are a few fragments from *Against Incomprehensible Poetry*, which perfectly exemplify this aspect of Miłosz’s thinking:

I must confess I did not feel comfortable in the skin of a modern poet, and that I was skeptical about “pure poetry” in its various guises (it was put forward under a series of different names), because I detected only idol worship in the tributes paid to the poetry. (PP 155; AIP 378)

Western poetry has recently gone so far down the path of subjectivity that it stopped acknowledging the laws of the object. It even appears to be proposing that all that exists is perception and there is no objective world. (PP 157; AIP 381)

Thus, profiting from my readings in several languages, I have been preparing an exceedingly capricious selection of modern poetry aimed against modern poetry’s main tendencies: against the flood of artistic metaphors and a linguistic fabric liberated from colloquial meaning. I am searching for purity of line, simplicity, and concision. (PP 157; AIP 380)

Miłosz finds examples of such “purity of line, simplicity and concision” in the poetry of Walt Whitman, D.H. Lawrence and W.H. Auden. All these poets, he says, in contrast to the poets he criticizes (Ponge and Stevens), affirm “being” (“byt”) in their poetry, or at least that is their aim. The author of *The Witness of Poetry* therefore repeats after Whitman lines from the latter’s poem “I am the Poet of Reality”:

I am the poet of reality
I say the earth is not an echo
Nor man an apparition; (PP 157; AIP 381)⁵

Miłosz also supports and signs up to Auden’s thesis, likewise cited in the article:

Poetry can do a hundred and one things, delight, sadden, disturb, amuse, instruct – it may express every possible shade of emotion, and describe every conceivable event, but there is one thing that all poetry must do; it *must praise all it can* for being and for happening. (PP 157; AIP 381)⁶

⁵ The poem is from Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (New York, 1855). Miłosz gives no bibliographical details of his source. I follow here the format of the quotation given by Carpenter and Levine – Trans.

⁶ Again Miłosz does not give his source. The quotation is from *The Dyer’s Hand* (1962). The emphases here were added by Miłosz. See W.H. Auden. 1988. *The Dyer’s Hand*. New York: Vintage, 60 – Trans.

Miłosz does not quote his own poems in *Against Incomprehensible Poetry*. But the reader can easily find numerous examples and thematizations of this way of conceiving of lyric poetry in his own work. Here is one example: the following poem is entitled *Realism (Realizm)* included in the volume *Facing the River (Na brzegu rzeki, 1994)*, a few years after the publication of the two articles on poetry discussed here. I shall quote only the first half:

We are not so badly off, if we can
 Admire Dutch painting. For that means
 We shrug off what we have been told
 For a hundred, two hundred years. Though we lost
 Much of our previous confidence. Now we agree
 That those trees outside the window, which probably exist,
 Only pretend to greenness and treeness
 And that the language loses when it tries to cope
 With clusters of molecules. *And yet, this here:*
A jar, a tin plate, a half-peeled lemon,
Walnuts, a loaf of bread, last – and so strongly
It is hard not to believe in their lastingness.
 And thus abstract art is brought to shame,
 Even if we do not deserve any other.
 Therefore I enter those landscapes
 Under a cloudy sky from which a ray
 Shoots out, and in the middle of dark plains
 A spot of brightness glows. Or the shore
 With huts, boats, and on yellowish ice
 Tiny figures skating. *All this*
*Is here eternally, just because once it was.*⁷

The witness to the contemporary reception of realistic art contained in this fragment provokes us to reflect on its twofold nature. On the one hand, consciousness of communing with representation is not unfamiliar to the “reader” of Dutch canvasses portrayed in the poem, which may seem obvious. On the other hand, however, that reader’s sense of or maybe desire for closeness between the picture (image) and the object and – by extension – between the subject and the object, is aroused equally powerfully. He therefore dreams of something which from the point of view of the theory of representative art is impossible and utopian. In his second article *Postscriptum*, a text which serves as a specific kind of footnote to *Against Incomprehensible Poetry*⁸, Miłosz openly admits that he is concerned about the type of artistic language “in which the subject would disappear for a moment in the object” (P 175), and the laws of subjective perceptions would surrender momentarily to the extrasubjective material of events and things. Just as in the poem *Realism*, the best example for Miłosz would seem to be the kind of contact

⁷ Czesław Miłosz. 1994. *Na brzegu rzeki*. Kraków: Znak, 25; henceforth MN followed by page number. Emphases (*i.e.* italics) are Agata Stankowska’s. English translation is from Czesław Miłosz. 2001. *New and Collected Poems 1931-2001*. London: Allen Lane, 606. All further translations from Miłosz’s poetry will be from this edition, unless otherwise stated, and will be indicated by the abbreviation NACP, followed by page number; also unless otherwise stated, translations are by Czesław Miłosz and Robert Hass. (Out of consideration for space, I have not included Polish text – Trans.)

⁸ Miłosz wrote the second text in order to yet again particularize and explain his point of view in response to his critics, following the original publication of *Against Incomprehensible Poetry*.

into which Dutch art of the Golden Age invites the onlooker. In *Postscriptum* he states:

Dutch still-life painting attests to the contemplative attitude which would be unable to reveal itself without these apples or this jug, because it would otherwise not have an object in the literal sense. (P 175)

And a few pages earlier we read:

the cognizability, or incognizability of the world according to one's own mind takes a back seat, because the important thing is the very surrendering of oneself, the identification (with a Dutch still-life painting) in contrast to the aggressive imagination which starts with "me" or the "I." (P 171)

How are we to understand these words? On what does this difficult to grasp immersion of the subject in the forms of being surrounding it and represented to it depend?

In Miłosz's formulation, the disappearance of the "I" in the object and the analogous identification of the onlooker with the image suggests an emphasis on the idea that poetry (and more precisely: the type of poetry that the author of *Selections from Useful Books* chooses as worthy of imitation) serves our contemplation of the world. Not, however, contemplation that goes hand in hand, as Miłosz puts it, with "Stoical acceptance of its all-encompassing, unique existence" (PP 161; AIP 386), but – on the contrary – contemplation that is an expression of non-consent to what indicates the absence of being, namely evil and death. The poet appeals here to the tradition established by Thomas of Aquinas that equates God with pure being, but also depends on the "constant identification of evil with an insufficiency of being, by means of which the Devil acts as the power of nothingness" (PP 158; AIP 382-383). It is worth recalling the poem that opens the collection *Facing the River*, entitled *Report (Sprawozdanie)*. Here the same motif recurs that we know both from Miłosz's critical articles and from the poem *Realism* mentioned above:

I gathered books of poets from various countries, now I sit reading them
and am astonished.

It is sweet to think that I was a companion in an expedition that never
ceases, though centuries pass away.

*An expedition not in search of the golden fleece of a perfect form but
as necessary as love.*

Under the compulsion of the desire for the essence of the oak, of the
mountain peak, of the wasp and of the flower of nasturtium.

So that they last, and confirm our hymnic song against death. (MN 6; NACP 590,
my emphases – A.S.)

The task of verbal art is therefore – as Miłosz portrays it both in the poems quoted above and in his poetic manifestos – precisely that "hymnic song against death." In the closing sentences of *Against Incomprehensible Poetry*, the poet expresses a similar idea: "In the poetry that I select I am not seeking an escape

from dread but rather proof that dread and reverence can exist within us simultaneously,” he confesses (PP 162; AIP 386-387). On the level of poetics, such a position must result in a call for a form of description perceived as an essential condition for epiphany. Miłosz once again rebukes modern lyric poetry: he stresses, not without a certain malicious satisfaction, “It is significant in the poetry of the last few decades, especially in French poetry, that the descriptive capacity has disappeared. To call a table a table is far too simple” (PP 159; AIP 383) – in order, a moment later, to go on to explain the arcana, as well as the kind of contact which a poet, according to him, should establish with reality.

Description demands intense observation, so intense that the veil of everyday habit falls away and what we paid no attention to, because it struck us as so ordinary, is revealed as miraculous. I do not hide the fact that I seek in poems a revelation of reality, of what is known in Greek as *epifaneia*. [...] Epiphany thus interrupts [...] the everyday flow of time and enters as one privileged moment when we intuitively grasp a deeper, more essential reality hidden in things or persons. A poem-epiphany tells about one moment-event, and thus imposes a certain form. (PP 159; AIP 383, my emphases – A.S.)

In Miłosz’s volumes of poetry, we indeed find a long array of descriptions understood in this way. Aleksander Fiut calls them metonymic, but also associates them with the symbolic, eschatological code. Ryszard Nycz emphasizes their traditional character, their connection with the theological provenance of epiphany and with the “sacral foundations of sought meaning,” but stresses at the same time their link with concrete reality, with the “*haecceitas* of ‘individual existence.’”⁹ Nycz claims that

[...] epiphany in Miłosz’s work is neither direct self-revelation nor pure technique; *it is an encoded trace of presence* preserved in experience, memory, language by the subject (epiphany is always “for someone”), who guarantees, legitimizes its truthfulness.¹⁰

It would be hard to find a more accurate diagnosis. One might only add that Miłosz was familiar with the dispute between John Duns Scotus and Aquinas concerning the question of the role of the material in understanding *haecceitas* (*i.e.* the unique individual’s ultimate “thisness” or “suchness” – the latter being the alternative preferred by Miłosz, which he inserts in English, associating it here with Zen Buddhism, PP 156; AIP 379), and that the poet’s position here is not at all unambiguous, though ultimately closer, I think, to that of Aquinas than to the creator of Scotism. That, however, is a topic requiring a separate detailed investigation. Here it is important to emphasize that when reading through *Against Incomprehensible Poetry* we find fragments discussing the impossibility of attaining *haecceitas* (“suchness”) through outlandish perceptions of the object. According to Miłosz, what is at stake is not so much the attempt to draw near the object’s essence in contemplative terms, as to capture the strangeness of perception. For this reason, neither Impressionism nor Cubism have any chance of discovering and examining the object’s “suchness” – since the aim of their encounter with a landscape or object is directed elsewhere. Miłosz dispels any doubts and ripostes that

⁹ Ryszard Nycz. 2001. “‘Wyrwać z rzeczy chwilę zobaczenia.’ Czesława Miłosza tropienie realności.” In *Literatura jako trop rzeczywistości. Poetyka epifanii w nowoczesnej literaturze polskiej*. Kraków: Universitas, 169.

¹⁰ Nycz, “‘Wyrwać z rzeczy chwilę zobaczenia.’ Czesława Miłosza tropienie realności,” 169.

advocates of modern avant-garde approaches to the object might formulate at this point – advocates not unfamiliar with the convictions and quests of the Cubists, of Ponge or Stevens:

In the brief triumphant period of French poetry, which was more or less contemporaneous with Cubism in painting, modernity meant a greedy hunger for the newly discovered elements of objects. What emerged from this was an almost scientific exploration of a peach, or a thrush, or a snail, that is, of those perceptions of ours which surface when certain objects appear in our field of vision. Often these are dazzlingly intelligent constructions, but I find very little in them for myself. The "suchness" of things is replaced in them by a purely intellectual deconstruction into their component parts. (PP 158; AIP 382)

As may be observed, Miłosz's voice in the controversy over "incomprehensibility" reduces itself, to put it in somewhat simplified terms, to an opposition between subjective poetry absorbed with perceptual and linguistic experimentation and descriptive poetry, which is simple, colloquially understandable and epiphanic at one and the same time.

It is time to ask what this has to do with the positions represented by the main participants of the interwar controversy (1919-1939). Whose side does Miłosz take?

Does he take the side of Irzykowski, who attacks "incomprehensibility" as an offshoot of the "green diarrhoea of associations,"¹¹ the "clipping of logical knots" and the "search for wild metaphors"¹² (Irzykowski defined incomprehensible poetry, *nota bene*, as a synonym for a form devoid of any external justifications and legitimizations whatsoever)?

Or maybe Miłosz takes the side of Witkacy (Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz) who, in the polemics with Irzykowski, defended Pure Form as "as a construction standing on its own as such, irrespective of any life connections,"¹³ convinced that only Pure Form provokes a sense of the unity of existence in its reception and allows the recipient to experience, as a consequence, the Metaphysical Mystery?

Whose propositions put forward in the controversy surrounding avant-garde form might Miłosz repeat?

The very choice of the concept "incomprehensible poetry" might indicate that the author of *Postscriptum* is closer to Irzykowski. However, he does not declare himself, as does the author of the complex novel *Paluba (Hag)* (1903), to be ultimately in favour of difficult or demanding, yet intelligible (*i.e.* understandable or comprehensible) form. On the contrary, Miłosz stubbornly demands simplicity and colloquial comprehensibility in poetry. Avant-garde form inspires in him – as we recall – purely intellectual recognition, not affirmation.

¹¹ Karol Irzykowski. 1975. "Nierozumialstwo." In *Wybór pism krytycznoliterackich*, oprac. Wojciech Głowała. (Biblioteka Narodowa I/222). Wrocław: Ossolineum, 419.

¹² Irzykowski, "Nierozumialstwo," 418.

¹³ Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (Witkacy). 1976. "Wstęp do rozważań nad nierozumialstwem," In *O znaczeniu filozofii dla krytyki i inne artykuły polemiczne*, oprac. i przypisy Jan Leszczyński, posłowie Bohdan Dziemidok. Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 364. From other sources, we know that Witkacy was an advocate of the harmonious coincidence of elements of three kinds: "metaphysical feelings," "life feelings" and the intellect. He expressed himself with equally strong disapproval on the topic of realistic art, which gives primacy to "life feelings," and on abstract art that makes an absolute out of the intellect. The act of creation, which has its fruition in Pure Art, he understood as the ideal unity of all three elements. (For a guide in English to Witkacy's ideas, see Daniel Gerould, ed. 1993. *The Witkiewicz Reader*. London: Quartet – Trans.)

For this same reason, the poet is also unable to applaud Witkacy in *Against Incomprehensible Poetry* as the champion of Pure Form. On the other hand, however, in this text there appears an unacknowledged citation from *New Forms in Painting and the Misunderstandings Arising Therefrom* (*Nowe formy w malarstwie i wynikające stąd nieporozumienia*, 1919)¹⁴. And at an important moment – namely, when Miłosz postulates a return to epiphanic description:

“The Metaphysical Sense of the Wondrousness of Being” means, above all, that contemplating a tree or a rock or a man, we suddenly comprehend that it *is*, even though it might not have been.

It is significant that in the poetry of the last few decades, especially in French poetry, the descriptive capacity has been disappearing. (PP 158-159; AIP 383)

Miłosz thus reiterates his own view yet again, interweaving Witkacy’s ideas with a paraphrase of Auden’s words quoted earlier.

It is worth emphasizing that Witkacy, the author of *Introduction to Reflections on Incomprehensibility* (*Wstęp do rozważań nad niezrozumiałstwem*), who takes a polemical stance towards Irzykowski, is the only figure from among all the participants of the interwar debate whom Miłosz mentions by name in *Postscriptum*, the second of the two articles under discussion here. This should come as no surprise. By signing up to “objective art,” obviously without “naïve belief in the possibility that things can be represented ‘as they really are’” (P 163-164), Miłosz in fact follows Witkacy, emphasizing – not for the first time – the role of the poet in a world where metaphysics no longer seems to have a place. The article *Against Incomprehensible Poetry* likewise begins with this crucial, Witkiewiczian observation:

The religious imagination in our scientific-technological civilization, however, has been eroding inexorably. [...] One might ask whether the questions that constrain the mind of a theologian or a philosopher have any significance for the poet today. My response to this is yes, and I shall attempt to explain why. (PP 151; AIP 373)

In *Postscriptum* Miłosz openly names the creator of *Insatiability* (*Nienasylenie*, 1930) as the author of the thesis that poetry takes on (for a time at least) the role of the bastion of *mythos*. And furthermore, having accepted such a diagnosis, he treats it as an opportunity to appraise his own role as a poet. It is worth quoting this passage, since it also exposes the second negative protagonist of Miłosz’s manifesto – portraying it here as the heir and continuator of modern thought, namely deconstructionism, and its belief that the relationship between lyric poetry, human beings and reality should be radically torn apart:

And, having suddenly chosen the profession of poet, when I was still far from acknowledging this as my central role, I had to make myself aware of my own significance. As if it couldn’t be otherwise. The disintegration of reality not guaranteed by any absolute, followed by the disintegration of the subject have left in their wake a kind of speech which speaks only itself. Here, however, a paradox becomes apparent. The poet proves through his activity that as soon as he accepts the assumptions of the deconstructionists, poetry becomes paralysed. Since, to put it simply, poetry needs belief in reality and must aim, in other words, for the heart of things while maintaining a sense of insurmountable distance. Poetry is always also on the side of *mythos*. This means that by appealing to God, or to the difference between truth and falsehood,

¹⁴ See Daniel Gerould’s translation in *The Witkiewicz Reader*, 107-116.

good and evil, we do not simply carry out a demagogic experiment for the use of lesser mortals, because behind the platitudes living content is hidden. (P 174)

In this fragment from *Postscriptum* the essential link between the poetic model postulated by Miłosz and reality is underscored by reference to the world and concern for "living content," without which not only art but any kind of human activity seems to him sterile, devoid of aim, and rendered powerless.

Taking all these citations together, one easily reaches the conclusion that the author of *Against Incomprehensible Poetry* and *Postscriptum* does not mention the controversy of the interwar years on purpose, the broad context of which he nevertheless reactivates. What is intriguing is that he brings it out by alluding to it and at the same time, equally provocatively, abandons it. The reason for such behaviour would seem to be clear, and the message legible: Miłosz does not wish to express himself on the question of incomprehensibility by using the same language as the writers and commentators of the First Vanguard (Pierwsza Awangarda). He does not wish to argue about the development of avant-garde form. If he refers in *Against Incomprehensible Poetry*, either in the form of a quotation or a reiterated idea, to the main adversaries of the interwar polemics – Irzykowski and Witkacy – then it is rather to transfer the discussion into other regions. Precisely for this reason he consistently directs the reader towards those trains of thought in the reflections of the earlier polemicists that might appear anti-modern. When writing his two manifestos in the 1990s, it is no accident that he also refers to the chronologically closer (to him) dispute over the imagination that took place after the Thaw of October 1956. Polish forms of surrealism, affirmed in 1958 by Jerzy Kwiatkowski and traced by him in the lyric poetry of Jerzy Harasymowicz (1933-1999) and Stanisław Czycz (1929-1996), must have seemed to Miłosz just as unproductive for "cultivating Polish poetry" as French Symbolism or Cubism. The choice outlined in Kwiatkowski's famous essay *Vision versus Levelling: The New Struggle between the Romantics and the Classicists (Wizja przeciw równaniu. Nowa walka romantyków z klasykami, 1958)* affected – let us recall – only two orientations of the same avant-garde paradigm: the constructivist and the surrealist. Neither of these, in the opinion of Miłosz, offers the sought-after road to reaching the "suchness" of the object or opens up the chance of safeguarding a subject that derives its strength from the "passionate pursuit of reality." It therefore made no sense to him to continue a dispute about the superiority of one direction over the other. The rhetoric of the interwar years, in contrast, operates with ideas which Miłosz feels he can exploit, on condition that they are purged of the meanings ascribed to them by the avant-garde.

I repeat: Miłosz continues, or rather revives, the controversy over "incomprehensibility" not as an internal dispute among the avant-garde over form, but as an opposition between a traditional worldview, whose diction in the twentieth century is Classicism, and a modern worldview, whose last great project is Modernism, understood as a formation with two outlets – the anti-mimetic project of Young Poland and the anti-Romantic project of the interwar years 1919-1939¹⁵. In the same way, at the beginning of the 1990s, as compiler of a poetry anthology that

¹⁵ This understanding of Modernism as having two outlets or directions – the Young Poland variant, of which the main feature was the rejection of the nineteenth-century tradition of mimesis, and the avant-garde version (after 1918), based on the rejection of the Romantic tradition – was

values the contemplation of things over the introspection of the subject, he reiterates the choice he made at the very beginning of his life as a poet. Of course, he does so in a different context, at a moment when “the disintegration of reality [...] and the disintegration of the subject have left in their wake a kind of speech which speaks only itself” (P 174), and when lyric poetry, adopting the premises of deconstruction, is exposed to paralysis – which is what the poet fears most – and isolation from problems affecting human beings struggling with the dread of nothingness (or nonentity).

At this point we encounter traces of Miłosz’s literary historical thesis stressing the “obvious continuity” (PP 152) between modernism and postmodernism. Today the connection is hardly questioned, but on the threshold of the 1990s the connection was not at all obvious to the Polish reader, even to the literary historian or critic.

The author of *Against Incomprehensible Poetry* consistently elucidates and critiques, with reference to both modernism and postmodernism, those trains of thought that contradict ideologically the earlier (in relation to both periods) belief in the objective world and its meaning (for the sake of simplicity, we will call it: classicist belief). This belief lasted until (and here Miłosz puts forward his most powerful thesis) there appeared a type of imagination that concentrated primarily on itself, shutting itself off ever more hermetically within the realms of the unconscious and of subjective sensation.

But what is this modernity? Today, postmodernism stands in opposition to modernism; this seems, however, to have as its aim the denial of obvious continuity. We need to return to the time when the family honoured traditional beliefs, while the poet felt emancipated from his family and assigned it to a category to which he gave the not very flattering name of bourgeoisie, philistines, and so forth, although what he meant by this was simply ordinary humanity unconcerned with intellectual matters. (PP 152; AIP 374)

As may be seen, Miłosz is prepared to risk being compared to a Philistine if only to stress the disparity between the poetic approach sought by himself and the activity of the modern poet, whom he regards as isolated from the reality surrounding him and preoccupied with issues relating to his own intellect, inner self, perceptions and language. Therefore, if we are to seek in Irzykowski’s utterances the idea closest to Miłosz, then we should turn not so much to his 1924 essay entitled *Incomprehensibility* that began the avant-garde controversy, but to the earlier text, dating from 1908, entitled *The Incomprehensibles: A Theory of Incomprehensibility Expounded, as Comprehensibly as Possible* (*Niezrozumialcy. Teoria niezrozumiałości, o ile można, zrozumiale wyłożona*). Here Irzykowski developed the question – similarly to Miłosz – of the aggressive imagination which starts from “me” or the “I.”

The author of *Action and Word* (*Czyn i słowo*, 1913) had discussed in *The Incomprehensibles* (1908) the appearance of a tendency preoccupied with the inner self (“jaźń”), which emerged as a complement to Naturalism. Irzykowski noticed that this tendency – or “cinematography of the soul,”¹⁶ as he called it – had devel-

proposed by Włodzimierz Bolecki. 2002. “Modernizm w literaturze polskiej XX wieku.” *Teksty Drugie* 4: 11-34.

¹⁶ Karol Irzykowski. 1975. “Nierozumialcy.” In *Wybór pism krytycznoliterackich*, 105.

oped two different variants in art. The creator of the first variant, afraid of being too vague or obscure (which could make proper understanding impossible) "mingled [...] in the domain of external spiritual phenomena; he would show the soul in a moment when it was behaving passively, in a state of *dolce far niente*." He was interested – according to Irzykowski – above all in the "background, against which the soul lounged around: a landscape, a café, a room etc."¹⁷ Meanwhile the advocate of the second variant, shedding that distance demanded by Irzykowski and making light of the virtues of intelligibility, allowed "the soul in an active, mobile state" to begin "to look for itself and unveil its depths."¹⁸ The latter creative artist, now not only overcoming but rejecting the myth of *mimesis*, immersed himself in his own self and saw himself reflected in his own mirrors. Irzykowski discovered examples of the first variant of poetic strategy preoccupied with the "soul" in the poetry and drama of Arno Holz. In the lyric poetry of his successors – Maurice Maeterlinck, Johannes Schlaf, Alfred Mombert, Stanisław Przybyszewski, Tadeusz Miciński – he recognized, on the other hand, many traces of an ever more intense engrossment in the self-sufficiency and self-referentiality of the subjective world of the inner self. With distinct disapproval, he declares:

This method of retreating to the roots of the soul [...] fell [...] in our [Polish] culture on fertile ground, supported especially by the frenzy of regression into ancient Slav culture (Wolska, Wyspiański) and various other sorts of [...] "*pra*" or "*prae*."¹⁹

He drew attention, not without justification, to the paradoxical lack of autonomy of these introspective visions and underlined their convergence with the fashionable and loaded, suggestive conceptions of psychology and philosophy:

On this point naturalism broke down, since [the poet] stood confronted by surprises; from being a comfortable spectator he became a miner and diver. [...] Every poet would see in his own soul those depths and pits he expected to find there according to his own philosophy. [...] All these visions, however, were self-delusion, since the actual theme of the vision was always predetermined by some theory or other, whether philosophical, natural historical or anthropological. These miner-poets triumphantly dig up with gestures of surprise the very things they themselves had furtively buried earlier. In order to erase the traces of this work, however, they try to ensure that the metal dug out of the mine is not pure metal, but metal ore, or in other words: they mix into the result of their discovery so much vagueness and nonsense that they achieve the surface appearance of a vision."²⁰

I am convinced that when Miłosz opposes incomprehensible poetry at the end of the twentieth century and links its obscurity to excessive interest in the deep *ego*, he is endorsing Irzykowski's comments. Can we not draw a similar conclusion to Irzykowski's from *Against Incomprehensible Poetry* and *Postscriptum*, when Miłosz announces that "Many poets are not even aware of the degree to which they are contributing to the further development of French Symbolism, which in the nineteenth century elaborated patterns of behaviour for the rebellious, isolated poet" (PP 152; AIP 375)? Patterns, let us add, which have their parallel precisely in the transforming formulations of that crucial concept of high modernism – the

¹⁷ Irzykowski, "Nierozumialcy," 106.

¹⁸ Irzykowski, "Nierozumialcy," 106.

¹⁹ Irzykowski, "Nierozumialcy," 107.

²⁰ Irzykowski, "Nierozumialcy," 106-107.

symbol or trope. The evolution of the symbol depends after all on the gradual levelling of the distance between the image and the message concealed behind it – a message which is subjected to a constant and progressive reduction; on the uprooting of the signified from idealistic systems; on simultaneous individualization and its binding to psychological theories – and, as a consequence, also on the ever increasing autonomy of the signifying layer of symbol.

In *Against Incomprehensible Poetry*, Miłosz formulates a view – similar to that of Irzykowski – concerning the sources behind the emancipation of undesirable poetry that shuns the world beyond the subjective world, and hence of conceptual poetry that is incomprehensible. The critical assessment which Irzykowski gave at the beginning of the twentieth century to the “incomprehensibles” whom he himself had read, the author of *Facing the River* repeats at the end of the century with reference to the poets he holds responsible for fashioning the main currents of modern lyric poetry: Mallarmé, Ponge, Stevens, as well as their lesser-known continuators and imitators.

In demanding distance, which creates a natural opportunity for “domesticating” (which is not the same as saying: “failing to recognize”) dread and preserving the ability to affirm the world, Miłosz steers the reader in passing towards yet another author, who harmoniously linked psychological tendencies with epiphanic description. His name does not appear in the text of *Against Incomprehensible Poetry*. We encounter it, however, in the foreword to *Selections from Useful Books* (*Wypisy z ksiąg użytecznych*), where we read about the role of memory in art that tries to counteract all-encompassing pessimism and increasing absence. Miłosz repeats after Schopenhauer:

Art liberates and purifies, and its harbinger are those brief moments when we look at a beautiful landscape, forgetting about ourselves, when everything that affects us vanishes, melts away.

And then continues:

When we remember [...] we do not strive for anything particular, we are not afraid of anything, we become an eye which looks and discovers details that previously escaped our attention. The formula of *Pan Tadeusz*, and in the twentieth century – of Proust.²¹

Thus, in Mickiewicz’s epic and Proust’s prose the poet discovers texts that reflect a formula, according to which the object becomes the ally of the subject, in the sense that that it allows and perhaps even requires it (?) to “forget about itself,” and in so doing makes present in contemplative memory what is most important and life-giving to human beings, threatened by death and infected by pessimism.

Therefore, if we are to be tempted to search further for undisclosed and perhaps even unintended connections between Miłosz’s article and earlier texts dealing

²¹ Miłosz, *Wypisy z ksiąg użytecznych*, 14-15. It is very typical that in this context Miłosz also refers again to the Dutch artists of the 17th century. Following Schopenhauer, the poet calls their perception purely objective: “This is exactly what we see in the Dutch artists, worthy of our admiration, who direct their purely objective perception towards the least significant objects and erect a lasting monument to their objectivism and their spiritual peace in their still-life paintings, at which we cannot gaze aesthetically without feeling moved. For those paintings speak to us of the artist’s calm, subdued state of mind, free of promptings of the will, so that he was able to contemplate insignificant things so objectively, so intelligently” (14).

with "the incomprehensibles" or "incomprehensibility," including the "incomprehensibility" of poetry, we can point to at least one more. For its author is none other than the creator of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, alternatively translated into English as *In Search of Lost Time* or *Remembrance of Things Past*. On 15 July 1986 Marcel Proust published in *La Revue blanche* (volume 9, number 75) an article entitled *Contre l'obscurité*, which Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński proposed should be translated into Polish as *Against Incomprehensibility* (*Przeciwko niezrozumialstwu*)²².

I should say at once that Proust's way of seeing the problem seems to me to be the closest to Miłosz's own. In this essay, he takes issue with the Symbolists. Similarly to Miłosz, he demands immersion in everyday life, attention to what is individual, and through it what is essential in its materiality and singularity. He also rejects, again like Miłosz, disdain for the masses. Proust describes this feature of the Symbolist attitude (the "desire to please or displease the masses") as "poor desires [...] which will, alas, enrapture second-rate readers."²³ Hence "obscure" (*i.e.* incomprehensible) poets, in his opinion, are those who deliberately inhibit communication, who write poem-rebuses, ignoring what is individual ("wholly instinctive and spontaneous"). In words almost identical to those we know from *Against Incomprehensible Poetry*, the author of *Contre l'obscurité* expresses his conviction that something else is going on in poetry other than a literary game:

With the help of your glosses I shall perhaps succeed in understanding your poem, like a theorem, or a rebus. But poetry demands rather more mystery, or the poetic impression, which is wholly instinctive and spontaneous, will not be produced.²⁴

On the contrary, lyric poetry, according to Proust, is supposed to penetrate "an obscurity of quite another kind, which can be fruitfully explored and which is it contemptible to make impossible of access through an obscurity of language or of style."²⁵

Proust also criticizes as mistaken yet one more assumption of the Symbolists. Namely, the conviction that only what is universal counts ("only eternal truths"), as a consequence of which concrete (individual) being is reduced to the role of only its equivalent:

If I may be able to say also of symbolism, [...] that by claiming to ignore 'accidents of time and space' so as to show us only eternal truths, it misunderstands another law of life, which is to realize the universal or eternal, but only in individuals.²⁶

As one of the researchers of the Polish edition observes, it is precisely in these

²² Tadeusz Żeleński (Boy). 1958. "Proust jasny i ciemny." In *Pisma*. T. 13: *Obiad literacki. – Proust i jego świat*. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy. Michał Paweł Markowski follows Boy and makes the same decision regarding the translation of the title into Polish. See: Marcel Proust. 2000. "Przeciwko niezrozumialstwu." In *Pamięć i styl*, wybór, oprac. i wstęp Michał Paweł Markowski, przeł. Marek Bieńczyk, Janusz Margański i Michał Paweł Markowski. Kraków: Znak, 343-349 (translation into Polish here by Michał Paweł Markowski).

²³ Marcel Proust. 1994. "Against Obscurity." In *Against Sainte-Beuve and Other Essays*, translated with an introduction and notes by John Sturrock. London: Penguin, 138-139.

²⁴ Proust, "Against Obscurity," 138.

²⁵ Proust, "Against Obscurity," 137.

²⁶ Proust, "Against Obscurity," 139.

words from *Contre l'obscurité* that Proust expresses for the first time the fundamental law of his aesthetics, reiterated many times in later texts. He claims that a work of art should be strongly rooted in the individual world, but also refer – which is not at all contradictory, but is precisely implied by it – to universal laws. In one of his letters, as Markowski reminds us, Proust writes that “great works of art are at the same time very general and very specific: they emerge from very concrete life and aim towards humanity.”²⁷ I hardly need to add that the author of *Against Incomprehensible Poetry* invariably confesses to that same law. He too might have signed up to the following words of Proust:

There is thus a risk that purely symbolic works will lack life and hence depth. If, what is more, instead of affecting the mind, their ‘princesses’ and their ‘knights’ offer to its perspicacity a meaning both difficult and imprecise, the poems, which ought to be livings symbols, are no more than lifeless allegories.²⁸

According to Proust, such a state of affairs can be prevented by concentrating on nature. The advice he gives to writers who try to make their poetry difficult is unambiguous: “Let poets find their inspiration more in nature, where even if the content is obscure, its form is individual and clear.”²⁹

We should add that *Contre l'obscurité* is not the only text in which Proust expresses an aversion for the French Symbolists. Markowski reminds us in his commentary that Proust expressed equally serious charges in an unfinished essay, which remained unpublished during his lifetime and was given the title *La Jeunesse flagornée* by its eventual publisher. In this essay Proust expressed the following opinion:

Never was the sense of obligation so feeble, never the disdain for tradition so great. Young intelligent people don't care at all about morality, don't work, read only storytellers contemporary to themselves, and create their own rhetoric on the pattern of Mendes and Moréas [...].³⁰

Are these not precisely the arguments of Miłosz in *Against Incomprehensible Poetry*? I, for one, could find many similarities here. Miłosz and Proust are united not only in their dislike of Symbolism. They are united above all by their similar position regarding the referentiality of verbal art, and their anxiety over the enormous importance attached in contemporary poetry to the subject and its exotic imagination.

One more, penultimate, remark. In *Against Incomprehensible Poetry*, Miłosz reveals himself to be, as we have already suggested, a critic of the structures of modern lyric poetry. Ryszard Nycz even calls this text, like Miłosz poem *Ars Poetica?* – an “anti-modernist manifesto.”³¹ In *Against Incomprehensible Poetry* Miłosz presents himself as an advocate of the classical paradigm, which is hardly surprising as it is the poet's own repeated choice. We cannot forget, however, that classicism is in fact one of the two pivotal currents of modernism, understood as

²⁷ Proust, *Pamięć i styl*, 206.

²⁸ Proust, “Against Obscurity,” 139.

²⁹ Proust, “Against Obscurity,” 139. Translation slightly adjusted – Trans.

³⁰ Marcel Proust. 2000. “[La Jeunesse flagornée].” In *Pamięć i styl*, 207. Commentary by Markowski; here the title is translated into Polish as: “Młodość polechtana.” I have been unable to find a published English translation of this essay – Trans.

³¹ Nycz, “‘Wyrwać z rzeczy chwilę zobaczenia.’ Czesława Miłosza tropienie realności,” 158.

a broad formation³². Similarly, two conceptions of literature inform these currents, based on two different understandings of the category of representation: the Proustian and the Mallarméan³³.

Miłosz, who subscribes to the first, the Proustian, chooses classicism, but this is modern classicism. His own modernity makes itself clear in the two essays analysed here, if only when he betrays the fact that he, as the compiler of the anthology, searching for poems which honour "the object, and not the subject" and "undermine the widely held opinion that poetry is, inevitably, obscure and inaccessible" (PP 156; AIP 380), rejects his original intention to reach for texts from various epochs and restricts himself to poetry of the twentieth century out of consideration for – *nota bene!* – the versification qualities of free verse³⁴.

He remains modern also when he writes in *Postscriptum* that the only support for a poet trying to capture the boundless multiplicity of phenomena "are his own perceptions, of necessity subjective" (P 163). And also in the moment when he underlines the disappearance of the naïve belief in the possibility of representing things as they really are.

He is modern, or rather modern in a postmodern sense, when, in the same period that he was formulating a theory of "epiphanic description" in *Against Incomprehensible Poetry*, he was also including in his own volumes of poetry "collage-type poems," which are very close on the formal level to postmodern *sylvae*³⁵. Nycz draws attention to this aspect of the work of the late Miłosz. In his most recent reflections on the author of *Facing the River*, Nycz even puts forward the thesis that in these texts by Miłosz on modern poetry,

his criticism – at first glance unexpected – of the modernist conception of poetry goes hand in hand with his postulation of qualities which are usually recognized today as being typically postmodern.³⁶

And he adds:

The concurrence of these features may be found as a rule only on the formal level: it would be hard to reconcile the aesthetic and philosophical assumptions, and also the ideological messages of Miłosz's poetics with the convictions of the postmodernists [...].³⁷

In a later part of his comprehensive study, in his interpretation of Miłosz's last volumes of poetry – in particular the volume entitled *This (To, 2000)*, Nycz observes

³² See Edward Możejko. 1994. "Modernizm literacki: niejasność terminu i dychotomia kierunku." *Teksty Drugie* 5-6: 26-45.

³³ See Michał Paweł Markowski. 1999. *Pragnienie obecności. Filozofie reprezentacji od Platona do Kartezjusza*. Gdańsk: słowo, obraz/terytoria, 9-10.

³⁴ "In the beginning, I intended to collect examples from various epochs, but in the end I restricted myself to what was chronologically closer to our time. This may be surprising, but to a significant degree it was versification that proved decisive. I had observed that traditional rhymed verse draws attention to its sound structure at the cost (greater or lesser, to be sure) of image. Only the shedding of its fixed meters makes it possible to concentrate on the image." (PP 156; AIP 380).

³⁵ Nycz finds in these two poetic forms the equivalent of two rival tendencies: "The first aims towards capturing reality as the material symptom of a *certain hidden order*; while the other sees in reality above all a kind of *limitless totality*." See Nycz, " 'Wyrwać z rzeczy chwilę zobaczenia.' Czesława Miłosza tropienie realności," 162.

³⁶ Nycz, " 'Wyrwać z rzeczy chwilę zobaczenia.' Czesława Miłosza tropienie realności," 158.

³⁷ Nycz, " 'Wyrwać z rzeczy chwilę zobaczenia.' Czesława Miłosza tropienie realności," 158.

that the poetics apparent here express a departure both beyond the principle of epiphanic description and beyond the principle of “the humanization of the extra-human,” which is characteristic of modern aesthetics.

the poetics of indicating the extra-human [...] rejects finding consolation in an epiphanic making-sense of the experienced world, and demands decided respect for the true face of reality – even at the cost of recognizing precisely its lack of sense, impossibility of representation, existence below the level of language.³⁸

[...] to indicate the existence of the extra-human is to show a world which does not lend itself to being captured by human categories; a world, which – devoid of a past and a future – dispenses with the human experience of time, a world which is not there to be represented, told or interpreted.³⁹

The significance of these observations should not be underestimated. On the contrary, they should be reflected upon in great detail, if we recall even such fragments from Miłosz’s late verse as the following from the poem *The Thistle, the Nettle* (*Oset, pokrzywa*) in the volume *Provinces* (*Dalsze okolice*, 1991), which may be seen as a critical turning point:

I was to be redeemed by the gift of arranging words
But must be prepared for an earth without grammar,

For the thistle, the nettle, the burdock, the belladonna,
And a small wind above them, a sleepy cloud, silence.⁴⁰

Does the poet therefore ultimately have doubts? Something inside me instinctively rebels against this suggestion. Does the elderly Miłosz really renounce all that representing, telling and interpreting? Does he transcend modernism, by trying to reach “beyond [...] the limits of human expression,”⁴¹ and not, as before, by renewing his attempts to find and secure it within an uncertain, strained, yet lasting state of trust? If the answer is yes, then he does so only to a certain extent. However much Miłosz’s lack of modernity may seem, according to Nycz’s analysis, somewhat postmodern, it does not assume the negative character of postmodernism. Despair is alien to Miłosz. He continues to be a poet of affirmation and wonder. He does not fall – as Nycz stresses – “either into ascetic silence, or into wasteful mumbo-jumbo.”⁴² He always appears to us as the singer of that which exists and which is – because accessible to the senses – at least in part, comprehensible. Thistle, nettle, burdock and – *nomen omen* – belladonna continue to retain their beauty.

To conclude, I would like to succumb to the temptation to compare Miłosz’s two texts with a yet another text, clearly related to them in theme and title, though probably not included by the author of *Postscriptum* in the mesh of hidden intertextual references. This reading will allow us, which is the reason for citing it, to give the floor to incomprehensible poetry, postponed by Miłosz. Namely, to lyric poetry that is or appears to be obscure, because it is excessively introspective and,

³⁸ Nycz, “‘Wyrwać z rzeczy chwilę zobaczenia.’ Czesława Miłosza tropienie realności,” 180-182.

³⁹ Nycz, “‘Wyrwać z rzeczy chwilę zobaczenia.’ Czesława Miłosza tropienie realności,” 185.

⁴⁰ Czesław Miłosz. 1991. *Dalsze okolice*. Kraków: Znak, 91; NACP 524.

⁴¹ Nycz, “‘Wyrwać z rzeczy chwilę zobaczenia.’ Czesława Miłosza tropienie realności,” 185.

⁴² Nycz, “‘Wyrwać z rzeczy chwilę zobaczenia.’ Czesława Miłosza tropienie realności,” 185.

more importantly, consciously refuses to contemplate an external object in favour of the internal exercises of the *ego*, in the hope of discovering the new poet. The arguments presented by Miłosz in *Against Incomprehensible Poetry* are – let's face it – distinctly harsh, and sometimes unjust in their generalizations and one-sidedness. If we want to polemicize with them using the language of the world-sense rejected by Miłosz, and appeal thereby to arguments that he does not take into consideration, then we might recall the somewhat earlier, though also post-war, essay by Aleksander Wat (1900-1967) entitled *On Obscure Poets and Obscurant Readers* (*O ciemnych poetach i ciemnych czytelnikach*), written sometime between 1963 and 1967. Krzysztof Rutkowski included this essay more than twenty years after it was written in the first edition of Wat's *Diary without Vowels* (*Dziennik bez samogłosek*, London: Polonia, 1986; first Polish edition Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1990)⁴³. In relation to the interwar debate (1919-1939), this text by the author of *My Century* (*Mój wiek*) therefore arose considerably earlier than the late manifestos of Miłosz, yet the reader would have had access to all three essays within a relatively short span of time (1986, 1990).

Wat begins his defence of "obscure" poetry with the same accusation that the nineteenth-century poet Cyprian Norwid (1821-1883) once formulated with regard to the passive reader, who does not wish to light the candle symbolizing the effort of comprehension. He calls this reader a person who "cares above all about system and rigour and does not perceive any order in the new poetry" (W 721). By the same token, he argues, this reader loses the ability to penetrate together with the "obscure" irrational poet – a poet who places imagination, sensitivity and memory above logical discourse – a path conducive to individuation. Individuation represents the highest value here, because it contributes to creating the subject, and at the same time – let us anticipate a little – isolates it from the dreadful influences of history.

[...] *authentic new poetry forms and perfects its readers* [...]: the reader is "in the making," exists only and continuously *im Werden*, and develops from poem to poem, together with the poet. [...] since independently of the result, if a poet is authentic, the very road, the very effort becomes, for the reader, a way of self-improvement, revealing new horizons and leading to *inner transformation in the process of "individuation,"* found by C.G. Jung in the practice of the alchemists. (W 720-721; my emphases – A.S.)⁴⁴

Poetry, like alchemy – suggests the author of the collection *Lumen Obscurum* (*Ciemne światło*, 1968)⁴⁵ – should not only favour this process of individuation, but also identify with it, as far as possible, both in the creative act and in the act of reception. Since true value – and here Miłosz might applaud Wat – is not language, not metaphor, but the poet's own specific "super-value" ("nadwartość," W 724)

⁴³ Aleksander Wat. 2008. "O ciemnych poetach i ciemnych czytelnikach." In *Publicystyka* (*Pisma zebrane 5*). Zebrał, oprac., przypisy, posłowie Piotr Pietrych. Warszawa: Czytelnik, 720-730. All references and quotations relating to this edition will be indicated in the text by a capital W followed by page reference. The English title quoted here was established by Tomas Venclova. 1996. *Aleksander Wat: Life and Art of an Iconoclast*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 208-212. Venclova includes some short quotations in English from the essay, and I have drawn on these in the translations here, but most of the essay remains untranslated, as far as I am aware – the passages quoted below are therefore my own translation unless otherwise stated – Trans.

⁴⁴ Translation from Venclova, *Aleksander Wat: Life and Art of an Iconoclast*, 209.

⁴⁵ I follow here the translation of the title preferred by Venclova – Trans.

which is simultaneously derived from, and irrefutable proof of, the existence of an individual in orders other than the social, pragmatic, scholarly, all of which are totally possessed by the rational desire for action. “What is more important: a pair of shoes or Raphael’s Madonna?” Wat asks rhetorically (W 725), then answers himself, reprimanding at the same time “clear” (*i.e.* not obscure), but inauthentic poets:

[...] it’s not about Raphael, but his innumerable imitators. For anyone who does not create a new value in art, absolutely incomparable to others, individualized, produces work which occupies a much lower place on the scale of human activities than the genuine enlargement of people’s material possessions by a single pair of shoes. (W 725-726)

The author of *My Century*, like the author of *Bobo’s Metamorphosis* (1965), will claim that he is interested in metonymic poetry. “Since metaphorical poetry has reached an impasse” (W 723). Making use of the terminology of Roman Jakobson, particularized by Wat as an opposition between lyric poetry that appeals to the imagination (metaphorical poetry) and poetry that appeals to sensitivity and memory (metonymic poetry), he distances himself from the avant-garde race against the conventionalization of form. He writes: “The only way out of this magic circle of conventionalism and anti-conventionalism is not the reinvention of language, but the reinvention of the poet himself” (W 723). Wat would understand this postulate in a way marked jointly by high modernist and *quasi*-surrealistic attention paid to the internal landscape of the individual⁴⁶. Thus he would call for the “writing of poems as a metamorphosis of one’s own psyche, and conversely: for the metamorphosis of one’s own psyche into creative activity” (W 723). And he adds:

In this way the work of individuation, which the new reader reworks authentically when authentically reading the poems of a new poet, becomes a reflection, or rather analogous repetition of the inner work of the poet on the transformation of himself. (W 723)

In other words, the creative and mental effort that evokes, as the opportunity arises, obscure form, as an attribute not as an aim, will prove to be the foundation and guarantee of authentic existence, not reduced to any external order.

If we want to look for further coincidences between Wat’s arguments and the voice of one of the adversaries in the interwar debate, then we should mention again, in my opinion, Witkacy. Wat’s understanding of the attribute that distinguishes the “obscure” poet – a poet, we read, who is fully or only intuitively conscious of a sense of his “mysterious acquisition, of the super-value with which he is endowed,” which becomes “his anointing” (W 724) and realizes itself in creative and psychological change – is close to Witkacy’s notion of Individual Existence (“Istnienie Poszczególne”). In Wat, as in the author of *New Forms in Art*, Individual Existence is not only preoccupied with its own strangeness and obscurity but is also, and above all, constituted and sublimated thanks to their having been experienced. Eluding rational explanation, obscurity turns out to be a legible and clear equivalent, attribute, symptom – “whatever one decides to call it” – of the mystery of existence, whether metaphysical or psychological. It is no accident that

⁴⁶ See Małgorzata Baranowska. 1984. “Trans czytającego młodzieńca wieku (Wat).” In *Surrealna wyobraźnia i poezja*. Warszawa: Czytelnik, 196-197; Włodzimierz Bolecki. 2001. “Od ‘post-modernizmu’ do ‘modernizmu.’ (Wat – inne doświadczenie).” *Teksty Drugie* 2: 38.

the author of *Lumen Obscurum* hints to his reader that this obscurity should not be so much explained or made understandable in the reception process, as approached by the reader in an act of empathy, making use of "intuition sympathetic to the writer" (W 727). Wat also says the following of himself: "The critic or researcher is not necessary as a mirror or microscope, not even as a go-between, but first of all and above all, as an affirmative voice, the voice of a tuning-fork" (W 727).

This desire for empathy sometimes expresses the subject's fear when unsure of its own authenticity, *ergo* of its existence endowed by super-value. More is at stake after all than recognition and admiration. The object of the game is the subject's being or not being:

The megalomania of authentic writers is merely compensation for their being unsure of themselves, its degree most often represents the degree of their insecurity, the collaborator of doubt. (W 726)

It is worth inquiring what might be the source of such self-doubt in the case of the author of *Lumen Obscurum*. What are the reasons for his unsatisfied desire to secure his psychological authenticity?

The reasons would seem to be at least twofold.

The first reason lies in Wat's historical experience. This means his initial affiliation to, and then incurable sense of the "debasement of communism," whose essence, according to the poet, is precisely hostility towards the internal human being: communism and sovietism, by subjecting the individual to the rational spirit of progress, both lead to the reduction of the "I." This familiar theme from *My Century*, which bears fruit – it's important to remember – in Wat's poetological thinking, in his conception of poetry as internal experience, also appears in the essay *On Obscure Poets and Obscurant Readers*. He stresses here several times that his liberation from communism was accompanied by his own hunger for individual, creative and human authenticity.

Psychological truth, transformed into creative activity, is therefore in Wat's diagnosis, the weapon against the exteriorization – typical of communism and sovietism – that voices itself in the ideological visions of any social or civilizational system. For this reason – the author of *My Century* argues – it is not only important, but imperative to cultivate psychological truth within oneself, listening attentively to the obscurity with which one has been endowed. Authentic being is always, the poet explains, obscure and internalized, psychological.

Is there anything that unites the authors of *Against Incomprehensible Poetry* and *On Obscure Poets and Obscurant Readers*? Undoubtedly, there is.

It would seem that the obscure super-value, with which we are anointed and which is affirmed by Wat, is a psychological analogy of the "suchness," to whose contemplation Miłosz summons us in his clear, epiphanic poetry. Both notions are after all objects of the same efforts and desires of the individual as it tries to tear itself away from the world of confining rationalism – of the human being who, with eyes and ears focused on the mystery of being or the *ego*, becomes something more, as Miłosz might say, than a mere humanoid ape, unable to recognize the difference between paradise and hell. Such an individual sets in motion the "religious imagination" (Miłosz) or the introspective exercises of the *ego* (Wat). Both notions ("super-value" and "suchness") may also be understood, to use the language of

Witkacy, as attributes of Individual Existence, whose eulogist Miłosz aspires to be, and whose restorer the mature Wat insists on being in his own interior life. It is no accident that the two poets use similar explorative techniques to lead them into their chosen, albeit different realms of poetic cognition: contemplation and empathy, which, when taken together, could be said to comprise Norwid's notion of the "common experience" of man and the world. The authors of the manifesto *Against Incomprehensible Poetry* and the essay *On Obscure Poets and Obscurant Readers* might also be said to agree regarding the fundamental aim of cultivating clear or obscure poetry. And that aim is to extend the boundaries of existence and being through affirmation and individuation – "So that they last, and confirm our hymnic song against death" (MN 6; NACP 590). Except that, as a consequence, both poets, Miłosz and Wat, will marginalize – which is not to say, treat lightly – problems of form and language. Wat would write: "The exposed creation turns immediately into a depersonalized set of mechanical devices and soulless tricks" (W 725)⁴⁷. The fault of modern poetry, Miłosz would repeat, is its "being sterile, tending toward purely formal exercises" (PP 155; AIP 379).

A controversial problem remains the role of the interior landscape. Miłosz maintains a consistent attitude of suspicion, not to say: hostility, towards attempts to explore that landscape. Wat meanwhile – torn between the antinomies of action and introspection, the internal and the external, the material and the spiritual, and much more strongly rooted than Miłosz in the modernist tradition, yet which he provocatively rejects in a Futuristic gesture at the outset of his poetic career – will set off on an "internal journey" with the total determination of an individual wrestling with the trauma of communist exteriorization. "There was no defense against anything there, but I could – and I should – prepare myself to defend my inner life," he declares recalling his decision made within the walls of the Lubianka prison⁴⁸. At the same time he is troubled by the sense, also shared by Miłosz, of the risks involved in such a journey. He says in *My Century*, "I knew both how dangerous that was and how easy it is to decay,"⁴⁹ while in a posthumous text, appended to the second Polish-language edition of *My Century*, he refers to "the things with which I identified, without possibility, without hope, without a path leading outside of myself."⁵⁰ In my view, Włodzimierz Bolecki is correct when he asserts that "a constant element in Wat's creative biography is the self-destruction of his own self, of his own I,"⁵¹ connected, among other things, with the exploration of the *ego*. It is significant that Wat himself ascribes an important role to these very trains of

⁴⁷ Translation from Venclova, *Aleksander Wat: Life and Art of an Iconoclast*, 208.

⁴⁸ Aleksander Wat. 1990. *Mój wiek. Pamiętnik mówiony*. Rozmowy prowadził i przemową opatrzył Czesław Miłosz. Do druku przygotowała Lidia Ciołkowszowa. 2 vols. Warszawa: Czytelnik, 2: 31. English translation adapted from: Aleksander Wat. 1988. *My Century: The Odyssey of a Polish Intellectual*, edited and translated by Richard Lourie, with a foreword by Czesław Miłosz. Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1988, 186. The order of interviews/ chapters is different in the Polish and English editions – Trans.

⁴⁹ Wat, *Mój wiek. Pamiętnik mówiony*, 1: 242; Wat, *My Century: The Odyssey of a Polish Intellectual*, 93.

⁵⁰ Wat, *Mój wiek. Pamiętnik mówiony*, 2: 319. This appendix is not included in the (earlier) 1988 published translation – Trans.

⁵¹ Bolecki, "Od 'postmodernizm' do 'modernizmu.' (Wat – inne doświadczenie)," 38.

thought in his retrospective assessment of his youthful fascination with Proust⁵². It would indeed be interesting to compare the way in which both poets read the author of *In Search of Lost Time*.

Does reading Wat's essay *On Obscure Poets and Obscurant Readers* contribute anything to our understanding of Miłosz's dispute with incomprehensible poetry which I have tried to reconstruct in this article? Does it broaden or complement it in any way? It certainly makes us realize, obviously, that their arguments differ. It also proves yet again that an opinion that may habitually trigger our resistance can turn out, on closer examination, to be nearer to our own than we thought. Miłosz, who held Wat in high esteem, would no doubt have conceded that Wat was right on many points, although he – unlike the author of *Lumen Obscurum* – never lost faith in the salvational power of the subject honouring the object.

⁵² Wat, *Mój wiek. Pamiętnik mówiony*, 2: 39-40; Wat, *My Century: The Odyssey of a Polish Intellectual*, 203-204.

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MIŁOSZ AND THE PHILOSOPHY (OF THE UNITY) OF CONTRADICTION

In Warsaw in 1943, during World War II, Czesław Miłosz wrote an article entitled *The Boundaries of Art* (*Granice sztuki*), which contains a rather hasty assessment of the first Polish philosopher of culture Stanisław Brzozowski (1878-1911): “repugnant” (though Miłosz provides an explanation: “because it is easy to squeeze various slogans out of him that are dear to the hearts of fascists,”¹ a charge for which responsibility should in fact be laid at the door of his interpreters from the journal *Art and Nation* (*Sztuka i Naród*)², as well as a no less thoughtless description of Witkacy (Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, 1885-1939): “he is not pleasant” (followed by the remark: “although at least he had no intention of being the nation’s instructor”³). Neither is considered by Miłosz to be a...“great writer.” Since, however, according to him, great writers occur very rarely and in Poland hardly at all, people “who thought about something” have to be sought high and low – like any port in a storm.

[First appeared in *Pamiętnik Literacki* 2011 issue 2; 75-84]

¹ Czesław Miłosz. 2005. “The Boundaries of Art (Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz from the Perspective of Wartime Changes).” In *Legends of Modernity: Essays and Letters from Occupied Poland, 1942-1943*, translated from the Polish by Madeline G. Levine. Introduction by Jarosław Anders. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 109-145; this quotation is from page 122 (henceforth: “The Boundaries of Art”). For Polish text, see Czesław Miłosz. 2006. “Granice sztuki (St. I. Witkiewicz z perspektywy wojennych przemian).” In *Zaczynając od moich ulic*. Przypisy Ł. Tischner, A. Franaszek. Nota wydawcy A. Fiut, A. Szulczyńska. Kraków: Znak, 80. [Not all Miłosz’s essays discussed in the present article have been translated into English. Where it has been possible to find a published translation, this has been used. Otherwise, all translations are my own – Trans.]

² Jerzy Tomaszkiwicz is inclined to think that the ideological bias of *Art and Nation* was less in fact than might be expected from the custodianship of the National Federation (Konfederacja Narodu) – and of the milieu associated with the former Radical National Camp (Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny or ONR) – because its editorial board was formed from a group of people who were connected socially rather than ideologically. Collaborators also emerged on the basis of social, not political contacts, which meant that the journal – especially under the editorship of the poet Andrzej Trzebiński (1922-1943) – distinctly liberated itself politically. We should remember, however, that the artistic preferences of this group were in no way close to those of Miłosz. See Jerzy Tomaszkiwicz. 1983. “Romantycy czasu wojny (Z dziejów pisma i grupy “Sztuka i Naród”).” In: *Portrety twórców „Sztuki i Narodu,”* red. J. Tomaszkiwicz. Warszawa: Pax.

³ Miłosz, “The Boundaries of Art,” 122.

Miłosz was later to retract this statement with regard to Brzozowski, devoting an entire book to him⁴, and expressing a far-reaching understanding for the philosopher (amounting to what he plainly admits is an apology) which only someone could do, who had suddenly begun to comprehend another person, as well as his views, because he is unexpectedly confronted with similar problems – having found himself in an analogous existential and intellectual situation (“the Brzozowski affair” – “the Miłosz affair”), namely that of a man who manages to switch between different ideas and points of view: Miłosz came from the leftwing socialistic milieu of the young writers of Vilnius/Wilno, but later, when he abandoned Poland (1951) – which at the time was putting into practice a mere caricature of the views that, in theory, he espoused – he wrote *The Captive Mind* (*Zniewolony umysł*, 1953), a book which denounces the behaviour of intellectuals in the new post-war conditions. He later distanced himself further from any form of political engagement discovering such people as Father Józef Sadzik, for example, in place of the catholicist within whom he had fought in his youth, and so on.

For Miłosz, Brzozowski’s view of *praxis* – distinctly opposed to the one-sided pragmatism of particular social groups – proved to be especially crucial. However much both positions may appear to spring from the same fundamental basis (connection with reality, verifiability through practical results), behind such pragmatism there is a hidden sanction, regulation, law, but behind *praxis* – in accordance with its Greek derivation – there is a dynamic of action, an active attitude, also marked by the freedom to transfer between different positions, if subsequent revelations of reality require this – not revelations, however, of the prevailing ideology. Nevertheless with Brzozowski, according to his commentator, “all ‘systems’ are negated, while the method of life-thinking [“*życie-myślenie*”] is to be recommended instead of them.”⁵ Miłosz emphasizes that – in contrast to Descartes – Brzozowski does not set man, understood here as consciousness or pure thought emanating from God (the subject), in opposition to the object (to the world). Such engagement of thinking with life imposes upon the former (Descartes) a dynamic characteristic of archaic myth (Nature)⁶, of which the essential element, life, is eternal change or changeability⁷. For various social groups, such ideological ambiguity, natural

⁴ Czesław Miłosz. 2000. *Człowiek wśród skorpionów. Studium o Stanisławie Brzozowskim*. Kraków: Znak (henceforth: *Człowiek wśród skorpionów*, I am not aware of an English translation – Trans.). I discuss the relationship between Miłosz and Brzozowski as a philosopher of culture elsewhere – in my paper entitled *Między Bogiem a Naturą. Miłosz jako filozof kultury*, read at the conference *Miłosz i Miłosz* (Kraków, 9-13 May 2011) [publication forthcoming].

⁵ Miłosz, *Człowiek wśród skorpionów*, 74.

⁶ Here I employ the concept of myth as understood by Mircea Eliade as a cognitive means of interpreting reality, not in the ontological sense as understood by Bronisław Malinowski, for example. See, for example, the entry by M. Nowaczyk. 1988. “Funkcjonalizm.” In *Leksykon religioznawczy*, edited by W.J. Tyloch. Warszawa: Prasa-Książka-Ruch, 84.

⁷ Although one may consider following C.S. Lewis (*The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, 37-39) that “*Natura* is the youngest of deities” and indeed owed her existence to the pre-Socratic philosophers, it is nevertheless absolutely crucial that in this instance she includes “everything” (even though Lewis – who is unfavourably disposed towards her – describes her as a “jejune and inactive deity”) – hence in the case of Nature understood in this way, we shall use the capital letter. Meanwhile, Aristotle’s nature (we shall use lower case), “which covers only the sublunary,” as Lewis indicates, became an excellent pretext for conceiving of her subsequently in the new order (dominated by

for *praxis*, stands in opposition to pragmatism; also, someone who advocates it may have to face the same fate as befell Brzozowski: the accusation of treachery or treason, and not only in the literal sense, for “the publicist had leapt into that nest of scorpions which is political literary criticism.”⁸

For Brzozowski himself, however, treachery in the metaphorical sense of betraying one’s former views (as distinct from the literal circumstances of his trial) is freedom – and includes the right to forget one’s former self from another time. Miłosz discovers the following words in Brzozowski’s *Ideas*:

After many years have elapsed, a writer often ceases to understand his own former positions and points of view. He sees them in isolation from the life that created them, as more certain because he no longer feels their plasticity, as it decays and retreats under pressure from his uninterrupted internal work.⁹

And Miłosz too takes up exactly this issue: a writer has the right to question his own declarations (“Macdonald does not shrink from appending a note: ‘This paragraph now seems nonsensical to me.’”¹⁰) or not to remember them, just as he also does not remember physical events of time past:

Many years go by and suddenly somewhere we come across a quotation from one of our earlier verses or articles: it is possible that I wrote that? I or some not-I? A kind of amazement and terror, as well as the impossibility of penetrating *that former* consciousness. [...] today’s consciousness is muddled just the same by passions, just as impenetrable to some crystalline point in our “I” as the former consciousness.¹¹

This way of looking at time as bringing out different individuals within the framework of a single life (the successive I’s) may be anchored in Nietzsche’s idea of eternal recurrence: conversing with Zarathustra, the youth states: “I change too fast: my today refutes my yesterday.”¹² Zarathustra, on the other hand, perceiving himself in the perspective of “glances” and passing “moments” (“all you glances of love, you divine moments”) observes: “O, you visions and apparitions of my youth! [...] Today I recall you like dead friends.”¹³

There is also one other question raised by Brzozowski that is crucial to Miłosz: just as he (Brzozowski) blurs the boundary between life and thinking, so too he also blurs the boundary between art and philosophy. Miłosz cites the following confession from Brzozowski’s *Legend of Young Poland* (*Legenda Młodej Polski*, 1910):

permanence) of the modern myth (the One God) as being very far from “everything” – for she was to become only something that was created, created by God, hence something secondary and subject to His laws. As Janion reminds us (Maria Janion. 2001. “Natura.” In *Romantyzm i jego media* (*Prace wybrane*, 4). Kraków: Universitas), the almost one hundred definitions of Nature assembled by Lenoble have only one feature in common: movement and change (Robert Lenoble. 1969. *Esquisse d’une histoire de l’idée de Nature*. Paris: Éditions Albin Michel).

⁸ Miłosz, *Człowiek wśród skorpionów*, 135.

⁹ Miłosz, *Człowiek wśród skorpionów*, 99.

¹⁰ Czesław Miłosz. 1991. “Dwight Macdonald.” In *Beginning with my Streets: Essays and Recollections*, translated by Madeline G. Levine. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 179.

¹¹ Czesław Miłosz. 2006. “Punkt widzenia, czyli o tak zwanej drugiej awangardzie.” In *Zaczynając od moich ulic*, 156-157.

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche. 1995. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, translated with a preface by Walter Kaufman. New York: The Modern Library, 42.

¹³ Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 110.

I sometimes have [...] the impression, when comparing the states of soul of a philosopher, a social thinker or an activist with the psyche of an artist, that not only different types of intellect come into play here, but also a certain moral colouring; that when compared to the mental life of an artist such as Baudelaire – all the other figures mentioned above, in compiling their own life experiences and trying to preserve themselves in relation to them, *as if contain a difficult to grasp undertone of dishonesty*.¹⁴

The particular form of dishonesty, of which philosophy – as a separate cultural field demanding its own autonomy as a discipline (just like every defined concept within its framework) – also stands accused, can be interpreted as follows: such “dishonesty” is connected with the absolutization of one particular perspective, and is therefore dishonest in conveying reality, which is multifaceted. The loss in this way of autonomy (of the entire field, of its individual concepts) in the interests of relationship or connection (which are imposed in the course of an artist’s work¹⁵) could be described here as being driven by the principle of *coincidentia oppositorum* (indicating in the spatial dimension – alongside the idea of temporal circularity – a desacralized or secularized equivalent to archaic myth, *i.e.* the cyclic paradigm). Whereas the effort of a thinker is directed towards theory, which demands stepping back from direct experience, effort in the case of an artistic writer is directed rather towards experience, which forces him (or her) to deny, thanks to a certain process of relativization, the “blinding power” of theory in the name of greater proximity to life. The relationship between experience and theory (a concept, an ideology etc.) is therefore reversed in such cases. One could argue as to whether this line of reasoning is convincing – since it overlooks in silence the existence of internal tensions between different views within the confines of one field of enquiry (in philosophy, for example, in which there appear highly “specialized” opinions alongside those that are more speculative – for example in the broadly conceived “philosophy of life” or existential philosophy – in other words, a multifaceted approach; or in literature, which oscillates between a strongly autonomizing approach – for example, the idea of art for art’s sake – and a position of openness to other fields). Whatever the case, however, as a result of his formulating the issue in this way, Miłosz can ascribe to William Blake or Robert Browning the ability to grasp more subtle and more difficult philosophical experiences (isn’t this how the dynamics of *praxis* arises?) than traditional philosophy is capable of doing (dominated by the immovability of pragmatics?). And yet we should remember at the same time Miłosz’s acute allergic reaction to any contact with the negative side of nature (and the destructive element in the myth of Nature).

Furthermore Brzozowski regards every creation (production) of man, both civilizational (cities, wars, factories) and cultural (works of art, science and learning) as a metaphysical work, and hence – let us draw the consequences – a work that reaches into the domain of Divine permanence¹⁶. And so, to this extent, the

¹⁴ Miłosz, *Człowiek wśród skorpionów*, 74-75.

¹⁵ And Miłosz “is not a philosopher in the sense that his thinking consists in any cohesive system of values; rather he moves freely throughout the whole European tradition searching for themes,” as noted by Krzysztof Zajac. 1997. *Miłosz i filozofia*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Baran i Suszczyński, 9.

¹⁶ The fundamental value in the Hebrew Bible is the idea of truth (“emet”), in which the Hebrew root (“mn”) expresses permanence and immutability and in this sense appears as 1) an attribute of

second of the two great myths organizing human experience (like a passing moment incorporated into the “eternity” of one human being’s total experience), seems to find a voice in turn: the modern myth (the myth of God), and especially its desacralized equivalent, the linear paradigm (with its hierarchical space and linear time). It is within the framework of this paradigm that human effort, understood as purposeful activity aiming towards the creation of a closed and completed work, has its place. Human history, according to Brzozowski, is to be this work in its most visible sense. It is quite another matter that Miłosz is extremely sceptical about the possibility of uncovering any regulation in history, formulating this in the most pessimistic terms in a commentary on Dostoevsky:

Probably the most important conclusion of the legend [of the Grand Inquisitor] is the claim that people are too miserable and worthless to be capable of rising above the laws of Nature. Nature, on the other hand, is under the control of the “great spirit of nonexistence [*i.e.* of non-being],” or the devil, and so whoever wants to rule people must make the same decision as the Grand Inquisitor, *i.e.* cooperate with him.¹⁷

Elsewhere, Miłosz speaks of the “demoniac doings of history, which acquires the traits of a bloodthirsty deity.”¹⁸

In this way the opposition between the stable law of God and the eternal changeability of Nature acquires a specific aspect in its fulfilment¹⁹. And if we treat permanence and changeability as indicators respectively of “structure” (associated with work and production, conservation of the status quo, finiteness, a defined place in the hierarchy, purposeful activity in the sphere of existence, and also rationality in cognition) and “antistructure” or proto-structure (associated with play, flux, processualism, the potentiality of existence, and also with paradox and shock in cognition) – then this complementarity and fulfilment may also be summarized by Victor Turner’s view that “Man grows through antistructure, and conserves through structure.”²⁰

The two initial components of Brzozowski’s thinking, aimed at the ennoblement of life (changeable life, in which however every passing moment ultimately becomes an eternal component of the internal world), mean that this philosopher inscribes himself – or so Miłosz feels – into the tradition (which also includes Pascal and Kierkegaard as well as others) cumulating in the 1950s and 1960s in existentialism; he even cites discussions carried on at that time, situating the Polish thinker – because of the particular views he espoused – somewhere between Sartre

Jahwe; 2) a feature of the word of God; 3) the essence of Divine Law; 4) the character of God’s promise; 5) the justice and constancy of those who fulfil God’s Law; 6) a description of states of reality; 7) part of the name of the City of Justice, the Faithful Citadel, Jerusalem. See Luiza Rzymowska. 2002. “Emet w Starym Testamencie.” In *Istota gnostycyzmu w świetle interpretacji pojęcia prawdy. Na przykładzie wybranych pism apokryficznych*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 67-68.

¹⁷ Czesław Miłosz. 2006. “Dostojewski i Sartre.” In *Zaczynając od moich ulic*, 420 [translation slightly modified – Trans.].

¹⁸ Czesław Miłosz. 1991. “The Nobel Lecture [1980].” In *Beginning with my Streets*, 276.

¹⁹ On the perception of human thinking as essentially based on the tension between two opposing myths and two paradigms, see Lidia Wiśniewska. 2009. *Między Bogiem a Naturą. Komparatystryka jako filozofia kultury*. Bydgoszcz: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kazimierza Wielkiego.

²⁰ Victor Turner. 1982. “Acting in Everyday Life and Everyday Life in Acting.” In *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 114.

and Henri Lefèbvre. Meanwhile, according to Miłosz, anything associated with the modern myth (God) voices itself in Brzozowski as a consequence of his interest in Blake as well as Swedenborg or John Henry Newman. As to thinkers contemporary to Brzozowski, however, Miłosz connects his utterances with the views of Simone Weil, for example, who observed even in Marx a perception of man (different from that of Engels or Lenin) as not so much a part of nature, but as an element antagonistic towards it.

Hence Miłosz, a witness of the entire twentieth century, reads what is crucial in Brzozowski, a philosopher from the beginning of the century, largely through his reading of philosophers from its second half, recognizing that precisely such a positioning makes Brzozowski a potentially much more significant figure than those who once occupied prestigious university chairs (for example, he states: “Zdziechowski’s rhythm froze him in his own epoch, which condemned his book published just before the outbreak of war: *In Face of the End (W obliczu końca)* to annihilation. Brzozowski’s rhythm carries him further”²¹). Moreover, Miłosz carries out here a form of interpretation that could be regarded as a specific kind of translation: from a somewhat outmoded or obsolete language into a more contemporary one²².

As to Witkacy, on the other hand, in the article I mentioned at the beginning, Miłosz does not hesitate to ultimately assert:

Nothing will remain, in any event, of the enormous number of “masters” of the novel, verse, or short story, but something enduring will remain from the work of Witkiewicz, who was by no means a master – and this is important not only in Warsaw or Kraków, but in Sydney and Pennsylvania, too.²³

Thus, whereas Miłosz attributed to Brzozowski a significance that was in a way timeless, he gives Witkacy a significance that is outside any specific geographical location. He does this even though he is aware that the latter recognized the bankruptcy of his own artistic ideas, claiming for himself nevertheless the status of a philosopher.

From Miłosz’s account of Witkacy, there emerges a portrait of a creative writer for whom certain crucial (metaphysical) problems appeared to function in three different versions in human history: the religious (we might regard this as an equivalent of the two myths mentioned above: the cyclical myth of Nature and the modern myth of God); the philosophical (systems created to try to uncover absolute truth – and we may regard them here as desacralized, paradigmatic hangovers of the God myth, dispensing a single truth); and the artistic, which arises in fact out of the bankruptcy of the intellectual striving in philosophy for one truth (which might resolve the mystery of existence) – a striving (consciousness) which has led in consequence to the creation of a collection of competing truths that again make us aware of the central mystery.

²¹ Miłosz, *Człowiek wśród skorpionów*, 191.

²² Tadeusz Buksiński accepts that the interpretation of texts may be treated “as a specific kind of translation of their contents into contemporary language [...]. Today’s contemporary language and today’s knowledge are the frames of reference for all scientific or scholarly interpretation [...]. A new interpretation somehow incorporates the text afresh into contemporary culture [...]” See Tadeusz Buksiński. 1988. „Zasady i metody interpretacji tekstów.” *Studia Filozoficzne* 12: 28.

²³ Miłosz, “The Boundaries of Art,” 122.

What may have been extremely important here for Miłosz as commentator is the suggestion that certain fundamental questions and formulations of reality, which we are inclined to call philosophical, have in fact an even more fundamental dimension – which lies, on the one hand, beyond all the areas presented here, but which is realized, on the other, in a definite and specific way in each of them. “Beyond” them, therefore, there must exist a world which is beyond the human, beyond culture and beyond language, and in which all aspects of our world, such as God and Nature, linear time and circular time, hierarchical space and space based on the principle of *coincidentia oppositorum*, are impossible to distinguish – or do not exist. Let us say they create the primal unity (“das Ur-Eine”) in Nietzsche’s sense. Only by stepping into that world “beyond” can a human being identify aspects linked to the conferring on our world, and even more so on human existence, of particular definite meanings and general senses. Because dependence on structure, on so-called stability or permanence, guaranteed by the existence of the one God and His inflexible or fixed law (from which the moral law may be said to be derived), brings with it different meanings from those brought by dependence on changeability, represented by Nature and its inevitable contradictions between opposing values. Different meanings are brought about by the hierarchical vision, introducing domination and subjection and hence inequality (alongside the simultaneous feeling that, irrespective of one’s place in the hierarchy, a fundamental equality is endorsed by death), from the ones brought about by *coincidentia*, which presupposes, on the contrary, the equality of inequalities (alongside the feeling that these inequalities are irreducible); different meanings are associated with the notion of a single, one-off existence enclosed between birth and death, from those associated with a concept of life where birth conceals the death hidden within it and where death gives birth to new life. But in this situation, the two fundamental mythic conceptions and two paradigms determining the basic internal cohesion of meanings associated with each possibility should be regarded as insufficient on their own, and as in need of the complexity of the two different formulations of composite reality arising between them to be taken into consideration. Of course, one could take issue with Witkacy’s approach with regard for instance to the simple failure on his part to distinguish between various religious systems, and at the same time with his equally simplistic association of the two desacralized areas of culture (philosophy and art) with one paradigm or the other.

Miłosz engages in this polemics, at least partially, on another occasion – with the aim of undermining the separateness or autonomy of the areas of culture so sharply delineated by Witkacy, as well as their internal uniformity. Having cast doubt in relatively mild terms on whether art had encroached into regions traditionally reserved for philosophy only recently, he declares at the same time:

It ought to be quite clear by now that I view poetry as an addendum to religion (which is the exact opposite of poetry understood as religion), of religion in the broadest sense (whether or not it can be derived from *religare*, to bind); at the same time the yearned-for fusion can be theistic or atheistic. The muscles and nerves of the mind are visible inside the word *religion*; that is why it is better than *Weltanschauung*. Poetry that shies away from participating in man’s fundamental effort at unification changes into an entertainment and dies.²⁴

²⁴ Czesław Miłosz. 1991. “Jeffers: An Attempt at Disclosure.” In *Beginning with my Streets*, 201-202.

Hence any engagement in philosophical issues is regarded here as fundamentally religious (theistic or atheistic), while positive emphasis is placed within the realm of poetry on poetry that deals with religion – thus establishing by this very thing the fundamental worth of such poetry, while poetry that overlooks philosophical (*i.e.* religious) questions, condemns itself in so doing to irrelevance.

It is significant that in Witkacy, art passes from being a scientific intellectual form of expression to a metaphysical “feeling,” while its formulation of the world passes from categories of simplicity to complexity, or from unity to multiplicity, hence to Witkacy’s idea of “unity in multiplicity,” which also chooses the work of art as its image of the Mystery of Existence (and as a consequence ultimately locates the work of art – on its way to a decisive redefinition – within the orbit of influence of the modern equivalent of the Nature myth, *i.e.* of the cyclical paradigm, with its principle of *coincidentia oppositorum* and eternal recurrence in time). All the “directional tensions (a term introduced by Witkiewicz)” made manifest in this conception are to be expressed in all their complexity by (anxiety-driven and dynamic) Pure Form, which is opposed here, according to Miłosz’s description, to the “old peaceful form discovered by people who knew other outlets for their anxiety” and designed to express “former dogmas, rituals, and inquiries into the essence of being” (in this case: stable, permanent being)²⁵.

This phenomenon, which Witkiewicz calls insatiability by form, leads to increasingly greater complexity of the means he uses. For contemporary art, harmony and symmetry no longer suffice; art is intoxicated now with dissonances, disharmony, the anxiety of asymmetrical, disordered planes. [...] Yet the insane works of a van Gogh or a Picasso are the only form of beauty accessible to us.²⁶

So Miłosz comments, his assessment of contemporary art thereby contained in the assertion “insane.” In this description – both in Miłosz’s evaluation, which links contemporary art to the unbridled sphere of the unconscious (demonstrated in Witkacy’s own work by the intervention of drugs, alcohol and uncontrolled eroticism), and in the specific characteristics Miłosz mentions – art is associated with “anti-structure,” in Victor Turner’s sense of the term, and also in the sense of its cognitive consequences (paradox, shock, excess).

However, despite these “documents” used to lock up artists “in institutions for the mentally ill,” or thanks to them, such art is able to counteract, according to Witkacy, the universal automatization of society, which is a manifestation of the degeneration of attitudes that have grown out of the (stabilizing) modern myth (the myth of the one God). In its desacralized or secularized form, this would be expressed by an ethics that has no metaphysical foundations, but by an ethics that represents the pragmatic needs or interests of a specific social group. And here again Witkacy makes a far-reaching generalization, confronting on very general grounds the individual with the masses. At the same time, in Witkacy’s case, in contrast to that of Brzozowski, the modern myth – or more precisely: its secular equivalent, the linear paradigm (associated with the automatization of the masses opposed to the individual) – plays a threatening role, not a promising role (as in

²⁵ Miłosz, “The Boundaries of Art,” 115-116.

²⁶ Miłosz, “The Boundaries of Art,” 116-117.

Brzozowski's purposeful work). In Miłosz's attitude to Witkacy as artist-philosopher, there thus appears a quite specific standpoint:

Now a question: How should one respond to aesthetic theories of this type? How can one appreciate them without renouncing simplicity and the unique meaning of words? These are phenomena that are too close to us for us to be able to treat them as only a chapter in the history of culture. [...] Actually, I criticize Pure Form out of love, because although one is pining for paradise, one may refuse oneself permission to return, if that return would only result in corruption. There is a danger in a programmatic recognition of Pure Form as the root of art.²⁷

Miłosz is surely right here: there have always existed (two) different types of art, and Baroque art, as described by Heinrich Wölfflin²⁸, contains many distinctive traits similar to those presented by Witkacy, despite their very different embodiments. Even more characteristic of Miłosz is his stopping precisely on the boundary – his remaining on the fence between the two different narratives: yearning for the myth of Nature sits, for him, alongside the prohibition of Divine provenance.

He clearly has a sense of the complementarity of the two ways of interpreting the world, because when he speaks of the two sides in an “ancient and extremely pettifogging lawsuit,” which they are quite wrong to drag through the courts, he accuses Witkacy of appearing as a “witness for one of the sides.” In this constant and never-ending suit, the sides taking part, according to Miłosz's commentary, are *ethics* and *poetry* (or rather ethics and *art*, where poetry is “the legally empowered representative of art in general”):

The first of these sides calls itself truth and virtue. It chooses reason for the foundation of its actions. The other side has difficulty defining its position, and when arguments are demanded of it, it dances, laughs, weeps, or utters unintelligible words. More than one judge is inclined to rule against it, because of its obvious dementia or the underdevelopment of its intellectual powers.²⁹

Obviously, the judge who stands on the side of reason commits the same error of one-sidedness that Witkacy commits – situating himself on the opposing side, but equally unambiguously. In the two “sides” portrayed here, however, Nietzsche's positions may be easily recognized: the theoretical (embodied by Socrates in the writings of Plato) and the Dionysian³⁰. In addition, Dionysianism is associated in Nietzsche, as later in Miłosz, with the aesthetic orientation, with art, whereas the theoretical approach is associated with (positivistic) science and ethics.

However, it is important to note, that however much Nietzsche stressed the repossessive tendency (intended to restore Dionysus to European culture, and above all to culture of the second half of the nineteenth century), his project was in fact geared towards a marriage between these opposites, symbolized by Socrates cultivating music (or Socrates dancing, the well-known formula of Julian Tuwim of the Skamander group of inter-war poets reacting to the new conditions in independent Poland). And so Miłosz too situates himself on this (third) side of the fence – or

²⁷ Miłosz, “The Boundaries of Art,” 133-135.

²⁸ Heinrich Wölfflin. [1956]. *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*. New York: Dover.

²⁹ Miłosz, “The Boundaries of Art,” 135-136.

³⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche. 2000. *The Birth of Tragedy*, translated with an introduction and notes by Douglas Smith. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

rather on both sides of it at once. He rebels both against Witkacy (and Dostoevsky, whose significance in the twentieth century Miłosz connects with the cult of contradictory Dionysian forces), and against the view of the French writer Roger Caillois, ready to accuse poetry understood in this way of existing “in servitude to the senses,” as happens in the case of the schizophrenic who sees only petals, thorns and stems, and not the whole beautiful rose. This is perhaps why, in Miłosz’s utterances in turn, an image of spirality often appears, uniting the dimension of the circular or cyclic paradigm, as the equivalent of the myth of Nature represented by Dionysus (and also by Christ), and the dimension of the linear paradigm, as the equivalent of the modern myth (of God) – although, at the same time, he fears in such a unity the danger of the rational exploitation of irrationality, instincts, dreams and the subconscious into which surrealism fell before 1939, in his opinion. The means of salvation for the individual has to be simply the freedom to exploit both roads, just as freedom, which cannot be destroyed by Plato’s “ideal” Republic, is the salvation of civilization.

This way of perceiving the world in the perspective of contradictory myths returns in a slightly different formulation almost a quarter of a century later, when Miłosz, speaking of the contemplation to which the poet should subject the whole of reality, claims:

The contemplation of which I speak prompts, in order to grasp, through the constant transformation of language, the strange play between what is permanent and what is changeable. If poetry does not take into consideration this dual character of our experiences, it becomes embroiled in false dilemmas, for example, it sets what is individual against what is collective and *visa versa*. If it then turns to what is unchanging, it is threatened by academism. Qualms of conscience cast it in turn into social and political themes, when it becomes threatened instead by hysteria.³¹

The permanent and the changing as representations of the ontology of the two myths, as well as dry rationalism or emotions as their cognitive representations, would therefore seem to acquire their full expressive capacity only when they are able to appear together.

Several years later, in 1980, Miłosz’s words again express something similar:

A few minutes ago I expressed my longing for the end of a contradiction which opposes the poet’s need of distance to his feeling of solidarity with his fellow men. And yet, if we take a flight *above* the earth [whether it be on the back of a gander or the back of Pegasus] as a metaphor for the poet’s vocation, it is not difficult to notice that a kind of contradiction is implied [...]. For how to be *above* and simultaneously see the earth in every detail? And yet, in a precarious balance of opposites, a certain equilibrium can be achieved thanks to a distance introduced by the flow of time.³²

On this occasion, distance, which manifests itself through an aristocratic hierarchical structure, and affinity, which finds expression in popular (in the Bakhtinian sense) tribalism – as well as a generalizing vision (in the cognitive sense), of necessity abstract and theoretical and hence rationalistic, alongside a vision based

³¹ Czesław Miłosz. 2006. [speech to] “Rencontre Mondiale de Poésie (World Poetry Conference), Montreal, wrzesień 1967.” In *Zaczynając od moich ulic*, 475-476.

³² Miłosz, “The Nobel Lecture [1980]” In *Beginning with my Streets*, 280 [translation slightly modified – Trans.].

on concrete personal experience that makes “emotional identification” or “reception” possible – again make present the above-mentioned duality in yet another variant, while explaining at the same time how its coming into being is made possible through the intervention of time – time, which allows choices to be made in a concrete given moment, but also allows a set of different perspectives to be created in the longer term.

And so the disposition or susceptibility formed somewhere at the start of Miłosz’s writing on this theme (the war-time *Boundaries of Art*) – a disposition that appeals to the fundamental mythic figures of our culture, *i.e.* Nature and God, by their very essence the most philosophical we can imagine – turns out to be unusually persistent and long-lasting (continually revealing itself and realizing its permanence by so doing); but at the same time it is also constantly changing its clothes (or maybe its masks – on condition, however, we accept that these are not only masks of Dionysus but also of the one God), and thus continually presenting itself in different realizations (responsible for movement and dynamics), itself succumbing to those very same determinants that it brings to light in the world.