

# **Irresolute Heresiarch**

**Catholicism, Gnosticism  
and Paganism in the Poetry  
of Czesław Miłosz**

**CHARLES S. KRASZEWSKI**

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By

Charles S. Kraszewski

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

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P U B L I S H I N G

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## INTRODUCTION

This consideration of the poetry of Czesław Miłosz was originally intended to be part of a larger, comparative study dealing with four Catholic modernist poets. Besides Miłosz, it was to have included the French Canadian poet Hector de Saint-Denys Garneau, the Czech Jan Zahradníček, and the German Elisabeth Langgässer, fronted by an introductory discussion of what constitutes the Catholic poetic world-view. In my opinion, this centers on the idea of a sense-filled universe, as proclaimed by Dante Alighieri, and elaborated, in our times, in the poetry of T.S. Eliot.

The portion on Garneau was written first. The Miłosz section was complete, and most of my work on Jan Zahradníček was also done when I came to realize that the project had grown to unmanageable proportions. Either I must leave off my practice of in-depth explications de texte, and in so doing alter my focus from poetic communication to the poets themselves, or I must break up the project into smaller, individual monographs. Hopefully, they would eventually all see the light of day, and my original comparative scheme would be accomplished, available to all who had the patience and desire to consider it, over the space of several volumes. As I was unwilling to do the former, especially since I had gone so far with close readings of so many verses, I opted for the latter. That being the case, a few more words about the original context of this study might not be inappropriate before we begin our discussion on the poetic corpus of the Polish poet—especially since it was rather a surprise to me that I came to include Czesław Miłosz in my study at all.

My research into the topic of Catholic modernism<sup>1</sup> was helped along, to a great extent, by a generous Summer Research Grant in 2007 from King's College in Pennsylvania, where I have the honor and pleasure to teach. As stipulated by the grant, I gave a public presentation of my work in progress before the faculty in October of that year. After the presentation, one of my former colleagues wondered whether or not it was proper to speak of “modernism” and Catholicism in the same breath. Were not the Modernists inherently anti-Catholic? Did they not lead the charge, in the early years of the twentieth century, against a too facile acceptance of tradition, including the Catholic, Christian religious traditions of Europe? The point is well taken, and defensible. However, I



believe that it all boils down to one's definition of Modernism, especially in the Anglophone tradition. For besides such iconoclasts as Ezra Pound, H.D., E.E. Cummings and the sometimes decidedly anti-Catholic William Carlos Williams, we have the great paradox of T.S. Eliot. In his spiritual journey, which led him from Unitarianism through skepticism and a flirt with Eastern mysticism into (as he saw it) Catholicism as expressed in the English Church, this Anglo-American master, whom Pound once described as the "young man who has modernized himself," took Pound's slogan "Make it new!" as a religious and cultural, no less than poetic, imperative. From about 1925 on, Eliot began to expound the timeless truths of traditional, Catholic Christianity to a world that sees religion as something become irrelevant; to a "neutral" culture lacking the higher dream, lacking the cohesiveness provided by a real apprehension of the Eternal; to an age, as he put it in his Choruses to *The Rock*, "which advances progressively backwards." It is a curious paradox, but perhaps an expected one, given the essentially paradoxical nature of Christianity itself, that it is beginning with Eliot's first truly "Christian" poem, *The Waste Land*, that his great success among an often un-Christian reading public dates. It would be tedious and unnecessary to list the poets that Eliot has influenced since his artistic triumph. Suffice it to say that his Catholic "modernism" has sparked the imitative imagination of poets as different in their philosophical outlooks as Fr. Janusz Ilnatowicz (of Wilno, London and Houston), my own master, the Czech Catholic convert Rio Preisner, and the sometime-Marxist, always non-Catholic Tadeusz Różewicz, as well as the subject of this monograph, Czesław Miłosz himself.

Yet if the reader still objects to the linkage of "Catholic" and "Modernist" I will not quibble over terms. The literary arena which has captivated my attention for these past several years can equally be termed "Catholic Moderns" or "Contemporary Catholic Poets" without any objection from me. In order to clarify what I mean by a "Catholic Modernist," I would set forth the following guidelines. The Catholic Modernist is a twentieth or twenty-first century poet who:

- while he may not write strictly devotional or religious verse, considers the Catholic Weltanschauung as his own, his guide to life; the presence of which philosophy of life can be felt in his work;
- who, in literary-cultural terms, is spiritually akin and often overtly influenced by Dante Alighieri, assents to his spiritual cosmography, and aims at just such a holistic, traditionally Christian understanding of the universe as knowable, ruled by a loving and omniscient, just God; a universe that is not scattered leaves, but a book, bound together by Love.

Such was the starting point of my studies. It should be pointed out that, in discussing “Catholic” poetry, my intention has never been to proceed like the Marxist doctrinaires of the late forties and fifties, whose main critical endeavor was to divide all creative writing into stark, irreconcilable camps of “us” and “them,” “progressive” and “reactionary” poets, “allowable” poetry, and scribblings to be repressed along with the scribblers. My intention has never been to present a poet, at the end of my consideration of his work, with a party card and a handshake, or, on the other hand, to set him on a blacklist of some sorts to be consulted by those who wish to eschew “heretical” writings. The very inclusion of Eliot as a foundation to my studies, should be enough to prove that my definition of “Catholic,” in speaking of culture, is fairly elastic. In his case, it does not matter what I may think of the Anglican Communion, in his days or in the present; it is enough, for my purposes, to accept his assertion of Anglo-Catholicism, his devotion to the idea that, although an Anglican, he is a part of the Universal Church, and that he assents to “core” theological beliefs common to all who honestly call themselves Catholics, while divergence of opinion on matters of discipline, such as Papal primacy or the validity of Anglican orders, is a secondary, and really irrelevant matter. As we will see in a moment, the elasticity of my definition of what it means to be a Catholic writer is what enabled me to consider Miłosz in the first place.

The second matter to be considered was artistic relevance and importance. I wanted to study poets who:

- flourished or began their careers in earnest between the end of the First World War and the end of the Second;
- who eschew, or at least make elastic, traditional verse forms such as rhyme and meter;
- who, unlike Futurists, do not reject, but rather embrace traditional European culture, especially Greco-Roman culture, although they strive to “make it new” or relevant in the new situation of twentieth-century, mechanized society;
- who image forth the confusing times in which it was given them to live, at times via “dense” poetry (disjunction of sense, clashing of disparate images, collage technique), but who unlike Dadaists or Existentialists do not consider human existence absurd, the world pointless and unknowable.

Above all, I wanted to consider those poets who played a significant role in the artistic development of their particular poetic idiom. It was not difficult to identify three of them. For the French, the choice of Saint-Denys Garneau was obvious: his highly-crafted surrealist verses—the

curious reader would do well to consider poems such as “Cage d’oiseau,” “Acceuil,” and “Un mort demande à boire”—are masterpieces of Francophone poetry; what is more, his pathological isolation offers a very distinct and individual poetic manner, in which a marvelous facility with modern poetic styles expresses a uniquely subjective voice, virtually unheard of since the nineteenth century. For the Czechs, Jan Zahradníček is, along with Vladimír Holan, one of the two decisive voices in the shaping of postwar Czech poetry. Germanists might have a bone to pick with my choice of Elisabeth Langgässer. However, the truly sublime way in which she recasts the ancient myth of Odysseus in “Frühling 1946,” dedicated to her daughter returning from a Nazi concentration camp, made of her a choice I could not pass over.

The reader may be surprised—as I certainly was—at how difficult it was to find a fitting representative from that most overtly Catholic nation of Poland. To put it simply, a consideration of twentieth century Polish poets led me to conclude that Polish poets were either very good, or Catholic. Unfortunately, one would have to fall into both camps to qualify for my particular study. Initially, I did not take Miłosz into consideration for several reasons. First, although I have always had a healthy respect for his importance to Polish poetry, and although several of his verses are among my favorite poems, there are quite a few Polish poets, ancient and modern, of whom I am much more fond. I believed at the time, and still do, that Stanisław Barańczak is the better poet, formally speaking. Perhaps this is a personal preference for quirky, inventive structure, but that is one way of measuring poets, and in none of his more traditionally crafted verses does Miłosz approach the technical finesse of the younger poet. I also believe that Zbigniew Herbert remains the more “pure” poet, with an ability to inventively narrate in incisive short forms that outstrips the more philosophical, more ponderous Miłosz in *haecceitas*. But Barańczak, a poet of the late sixties, comes too late to be grouped with the “modernist” generation (as defined above), and in any case, neither he nor Herbert can be described as a Catholic poet.

Certain poets of the Catholic tradition that fall within the proper timeframe, such as Kazimierz Wierzyński or Jan Lechoń, aren’t in the same league as Garneau and Zahradníček, and their inclusion would raise eyebrows among those familiar with the Polish tradition in letters. Wierzyński is a solid, if rather minor, poet, who developed a modern style only much, much later than the great stylists of the period Różewicz and Herbert, to say nothing of the idiosyncratic Miron Białoszewski. Lechoń, although interesting as an individual, never outgrew the tired, the very tired, diction of the Romantics.

While I acknowledge the significance of Czesław Miłosz as, all things considered, the most important Polish poet of the twentieth century, I never thought of him as a Catholic. Too often did he express a primitive paganism in his poems of the dark Lithuanian forests; too frequently did he declare, implicitly and explicitly, his dualistic convictions, his anti-Augustinian ideas of the incompatibility of evil and a wholly good God, his Manicheanism, for me to think of him as anything remotely approaching a Catholic poet.

But then he died. And in the controversy that erupted surrounding the plans for his entombment at Skalka—the Polish artistic pantheon at the Paulist church of St. Michael the Archangel in Kraków—there came to light the curious letter that he had written to Pope John Paul II, in which he expresses his lifelong devotion to the Church, and—what is most striking—asks for a written acknowledgement of his strivings to “express Catholic orthodoxy” in his poetry. This was something new! And thus was I led to a systematic consideration of his poetry, to see just what lay behind this claim. What I found is contained in the pages which follow.

The book is arranged chronologically. Chapter I deals with the poetry published or composed between 1933-1945, the prewar years and the years of Nazi-Soviet occupation, which Miłosz spent in Warsaw, and later Kraków. Chapter II, 1945-1960, covers those poems written or published after the war, while Miłosz was in the service of the communist-led Polish People’s Republic. It includes poems written in Poland, and at his diplomatic postings in New York and Washington, D.C., up until his defection to France. In 1960, Miłosz was offered a teaching position at the University of California, Berkeley. He traveled to this country in that year, and stayed here for the next three decades, until his retirement from a position in the Slavic Department. Chapter III is concerned with poems written during these California years, from his arrival in the Bay Area until his reception of the Nobel Prize for Literature. Chapter IV, entitled “Berkeley and Stockholm,” deals with the early eighties, when, because of the prize, Miłosz became an internationally recognized figure; while Chapter V, with which the book ends, covers his final years, his gradual re-location to Kraków, and his final collections of poetry, including *Wiersze ostatnie* [Final Verses], which was brought out posthumously by the Znak publishing house.

In the pages which follow I concern myself with the poetry, and only with the poetry. From time to time, references to Miłosz’s prose works are made when appropriate, but this is intended to be a consideration of Miłosz the poet, rather than Miłosz the writer, or even Miłosz the man. Readers seeking a more comprehensive treatment of the entirety of his

works are due to be disappointed, but I beg their indulgence in consideration of the large amount of poetry covered. If all of his prose, not to mention his biography and ephemeral writings were to be considered, such a full attention could not be given to the verse.<sup>2</sup> Again, all of the poetry was considered, and, as far as it falls under the rubrics of our perspective:—poetry expressing religious sentiment—it was covered. This was not always an easy task, especially considering the very uneven quality of the poems of his latest period.

Thus, our discussion concerns the poetry of Czesław Miłosz. To what extent does it concern the person of Miłosz himself? It has always been a cardinal rule of mine, when critiquing poetry, to concentrate on the poem, and not the poet. However, the question of to what extent the poet can be identified with the poem's narrator is of particular moment in the case of Czesław Miłosz. When, in conversation with a person who knew Miłosz very well, I once remarked on the heterodox views, religious and otherwise, expressed in Miłosz's poetry, the friend responded without a moment's hesitation: "With Miłosz, there is the voice of the poetry, which is not always the voice of the man. There is often a distinction to be made between the religious views enunciated in the poetry, and the religious views held to by the man." In this, Miłosz perhaps comes close to Dante, but the Dante of the *Vita nuova*, rather than he of the *Divina commedia*. In that earlier work, the troubadour-trained Dante goes to great lengths to keep the identity of his *donna ideale*, Beatrice, secret, even resorting to the stratagem of employing a "screen"—a woman who believes herself to be, and whom others believe to be, the addressee of Dante's love poetry, while the real object of his ardor remains hidden, known only to himself. In the pages which follow, this "stratagem" of Miłosz's—which he himself acknowledged in *Nieobjęta ziemia* [The Unattainable Earth] and at a meeting of artists at the Vatican—we call his "inner orthodoxy." If we are to take him at his word in his essay "Wychowanie katolickie" ["A Catholic Upbringing"], this is something that he had carried with him since early childhood:

The priest took me for an atheist, but he was mistaken. Of course it is true that I led him on in his error, out of selfish jealousy: that which is hidden, is dearer to us than it would be, if we declared it publicly.<sup>3</sup>

But these words must also be glanced off of what immediately follows them:

Later in life I noticed the same inclination among crypto-Catholics belonging to the apparatus of the communist state. Their religiosity was

more fervent than that of the openly practicing faithful.

What stand do we take here? To what extent, if any, can one serve two masters, in this case God and Lenin? What weight are we to give to the public statements of people who are avowedly playing possum with their innermost convictions? This, as we shall see, will be a difficult thing to assess when dealing with the poetic expressions of Czesław Miłosz, especially those of his latter periods.

It is noteworthy that, in the paragraph just quoted, Miłosz passes no moral judgment. Nor should we, perhaps, but, in the context of literary criticism, we can set the following narrative question: Is this honest, this game of “what my narrator says, is not what I myself think?” It is believable, sustainable, in the case of a poet such as Robert Browning of the dramatic monologue, or Ezra Pound of the browningsque Personae, or John Donne when, in order to achieve a shocking baroque paradox, the *concors in discordia*, he speaks in the voice of a woman. But with a poet such as Czesław Miłosz, whose identifiable, real person often stands so baldly before us in the lines of his subjective lyrics? A poet so assertively himself as Miłosz, speaking the first person? It certainly makes the task of the critic no easier, who strives to preserve the clinical distinction between “poet” and “narrator.” We would like, therefore, to take the man Czesław Miłosz out of the equation entirely, and to suggest that our study is not of the religious opinions of Czesław Miłosz, but rather the aspects of religion as expressed in the poetry of Czesław Miłosz. Whether or not we have been successful in this attempt is not for us to say.

At any rate, if Miłosz and others will convince us of the distinct realities of Miłosz-man and Miłosz-poet, that is, of the possible disjunct between what Miłosz says and what Miłosz actually believes, of the existence of a non-Miłoszian, so to speak, narrator who enunciates positions that Miłosz the poet need not necessarily ascribe to, we are, I believe, fully justified in making a similar split between what Miłosz enunciates as a poet, and what Miłosz enunciates in his prose. Again, this book is not a literary biography, nor is it an all-embracing approach to Miłosz’s thought, as expressed in his correspondence, and his prose, as well as his poetry. It is, above all, a consideration of Catholic, and other religious themes in the poetry written by Czesław Miłosz, that poetic heresiarch who, in so unexpected a way, prostrated himself before the Pope.

One final note, before we begin our consideration of Miłosz’s poetry. In 1981, after an absence of thirty years, Miłosz returned to Poland for a brief visit, during which he was awarded a doctorate *honoris causa* by the Catholic University of Lublin. Speaking to the assembled faculty and

students on that occasion, he took the opportunity to address the issue of Catholic poetry:

Receiving this exalted distinction from an institution, which was engendered by the Department of Theology of the University of Vilnius, I feel obliged to state that I am not a Catholic poet. Whoever makes use of that epithet in literature assumes *eo ipso* that others, who do not identify themselves as such, are therefore not Catholic. This seems both doubtful to me, and in disaccord with the meaning of the word *katholikos*, which means universal, general. By introducing such distinctions, it is easy to lose sight of what unites people, rather than divides them.<sup>4</sup>

It seems to me that Miłosz is using the term “Catholic poet” in a manner in which I would not like to employ it. For Miłosz (extrapolating from the above statement), a “Catholic poet” is a person whose purpose in writing is to enunciate the truths of his faith; he is a propagandist in the same way that the later Tadeusz Borowski or postwar Jerzy Andrzejewski<sup>5</sup> were communist writers, i.e. persons employing their literary talents as a weapon in the class war the Party was waging. I, on the other hand, would employ the term in the manner of a naturalist who, on the basis of an animal’s physiological makeup, will differentiate a mule deer from a white-tailed deer from an elk. For me, Miłosz may be considered a Catholic poet inasmuch as he may be labeled a Lithuanian poet, a Polish poet, a classically-trained poet, or a Californian poet. All of these things go into the makeup of the personality he cannot but express in his poetry. He is definitely not a Muslim poet, a Hungarian poet, a Beat poet, or a poet of the Argentinean pampas.

In his essay on religious poetry, T.S. Eliot speaks of his desire for a literature that is unconsciously Christian, i.e. for a literature that is not polemical in a Christian sense, but which reveals the opinions and manners of expressions of artists who are formed by an actively Christian culture.<sup>6</sup> Something approaching that can be seen in the work of the film director Krzysztof Zanussi, who once said of himself “I am not a Catholic artist; I am an artist who also happens to be Catholic.” In a discussion of the films of Krzysztof Zanussi, we would not be concentrating on his screenplays insofar as they are cinematic catechisms. Rather, we would discuss, and indeed could not avoid discussing, the manner in which Catholic themes and viewpoints and problems are introduced, developed and thought through in his films. I propose to do the same with the verse of Czesław Miłosz.

In his essay “Religijność Zdziechowskiego” [“The Religiosity of Zdziechowski”] Miłosz himself approaches the matter in a similar way,

although he reaches a curious conclusion. There, he writes:

To describe someone as a Catholic writer is not to describe him at all—because Catholicism, preserving an identity of dogmas, takes on ever new forms, realizing itself ever anew, and by the very necessity of its struggle in a changing historical environment, it takes advantage of new manners of comprehending the world. Not only does each new age have a different Catholicism—but among Catholics near to one another in time there exist huge differences in religious style—depending on what element works on them most strongly, and what they give special emphasis to. Chesterton was a Catholic by virtue of his delight in the complexity of life, its fantasticality. Zdziechowski—because of his sense of the immensity and threat of evil.<sup>7</sup>

This quote of Miłosz’s raises more questions than it answers. For example, is Catholicism a matter of religious “style?” What exactly is “religious style?” And is Catholicity nothing more than a manner of comprehending the world, or, rather, of engaging the world, responding to the world, from a habit of thought firmly grounded in Catholic bedrock? But more important are the words that we have italicized in the above citation and its English translation. The Catholicism of this or that author may differ from this one, or that one over there, but for them to truly be Catholic authors, they must express, or at least not deny, the core philosophical system that has developed in the Church over the past two thousand years. They must, at least to such an extent, be bound by that “identity of dogmas.” One cannot reject or disown Catholicism in one’s writings and still be considered a Catholic writer. A question of integrity is broached when one speculates on the possibility of someone being Catholic in his personal life, yet expressing himself in un-Catholic or even anti-Catholic manners in his art. It is too simplistic to suggest that such a person is like the stubborn little boy who says “I didn’t do it!” when called out on a lie. However, one can look at the body of art produced by that person as a phenomenon *sui generis*, without relation to its author, and pass judgment on its philosophical expressions distinct from those held, or not held, by that author. In this respect, we may well find that Czesław Miłosz was a Catholic, but the philosophical thrust of his poetic oeuvre is anything but.<sup>8</sup>

I am belaboring this rather obvious point, because a reader of this book in manuscript suggested that he was still unsure of what I mean by the term “Catholic poet.” I would think that the definition given in the opening pages of this introduction should answer that question. However, if further clarification is needed to settle the matter, I think that one need go no farther than a comparison of the religious views expressed in a given



poet's written work with the expressions of faith listed in the Nicene Creed. A poet who expresses the nature of God in accordance with Trinitarian theology is speaking like a Catholic; a poet who expresses an understanding of the person of Christ as a created being may call himself a Christian, but he is certainly not speaking like a Catholic. He speaks with the voice of an Arian, a Unitarian, or perhaps a Latter Day Saint. A poet who acquiesces to the doctrine of the resurrection of the body is speaking in a Catholic manner. A poet who negates that, *eo ipso* puts himself outside of the "Catholic" classification. To press on just a bit further, although he may not agree with the traditional Aquinian theology of transubstantiation, in speaking of the Eucharist, the poet must acknowledge the Real Presence of Christ in the sacrament (not merely a symbolic presence, but a real, physical presence) to be himself acknowledged as in line with Catholic orthodoxy. I believe that this is a fair approach to the question, regardless of what one thinks of Catholic theology. An atheist can successfully classify poets according to this objective measuring stick. One needn't be a tortoise or a lizard oneself in order to correctly recognize certain animals as reptiles. Nor need one cherish a particular fondness for them.

\*

Most, if not all, of the poems of Czesław Miłosz have been translated into English. Robert Hass' name is most often associated with English versions of Miłosz's poetry, and his translations hold a special weight, as quite often, the poet himself aided in bringing them over into English. However, in the discussions which follow, I base my observations entirely upon the Polish originals of Miłosz's poetry. I read Polish with a native fluency, and thus have never had a need to consult English versions of the poems, save in comparative studies of the art of translation, or in sharing them in a classroom setting with non-Polish speakers — and even in such cases of mixed critical discussion, I myself always work from the original Polish. For various reasons, chief among them being concerns of space, I offer only simple prose translations of the poems I comment upon in this book, as evidentiary illustrations of my criticism. This is not the optimal *modus operandi*, as, ideally, a poet ought to be met upon his own ground by his readers, without the intermediary filter of a translator. However, in the present case, I believe that this system is not unreasonable. First of all, many of the readers of this book will not possess a facility with the Polish language, and thus quotes in the original tongue will be of no use to them. Second, those Polish speakers who would like to check my criticism

against the originals will have little trouble in doing so, as the Polish poems are readily available in print, and, chances are, they will be lying in arm's reach of such readers, on their own bookshelves. Thirdly, as I point out above, I the critic am not working through an English filter, but directly dealing with the Polish text, which, I believe, is the only honest manner of doing literary criticism. I am commenting directly upon the poems of Czesław Miłosz, and not Czeslaw Miłosz as Robert Hass or Peter Dale Scott present him to me.<sup>9</sup> The prose translations I offer are not poems in their own right. They are prose trots, as faithful to the literal sense of my critical understanding of the Polish originals as I, and the English language, can make them. Fourth and finally, Czesław Miłosz, though a fine poet, was not a metrical innovator. He is a lucid, classical poet working in very sober forms, which add little, if anything, to the understanding of the thought expressed in the content of the words themselves. As a matter of fact, his metrical line is sometimes so slack, especially in the verses of his final years, as to seem little differentiated from prose unless merely by rather arbitrary line breaks. Whenever he does attempt a significant formal effect, which is an infrequent occurrence, or whenever the Polish text requires a closer explanation because of alternate possible readings or puns, the text will be quoted briefly in the original, with, I hope, an adequate explanation of the anomaly in question.

*Flagstaff, AZ, October 22, 2009*

Since this introduction was written, portions of this book have appeared in different form, elsewhere. For example, information from Chapter III was utilized for my recent article "Samotność i hermetyczność w wierszach amerykańskich Czesława Miłosza" ["Loneliness and Hermeticism in the American Poems of Czesław Miłosz"] which appeared in the Polish periodical *Odra* MMXI (2011) 5:58-66. I also relied on this text for my presentation "The Enemy Within: the Dialogic Verse of Czesław Miłosz," given at the 2011 convention of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association, Scottsdale, AZ, October 7, 2011.

*Scottsdale, AZ, October 8, 2011.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Catholic literary modernism” might be a more precise descriptive tag. My study has nothing to do with the nineteenth-century phenomenon of theological Modernism.

<sup>2</sup> Even so pro-Miłosz a critic as Aleksander Fiut will acknowledge the “discrepancies” to be found between “the convictions that Miłosz expresses in his poetry and those expressed in his prose,” although, in his opinion, they are not “crucial.” In our discussion of the poetry by itself, we will have more than enough philosophical “discrepancies” to deal with. For Fiut, see his seminal *The Eternal Moment. The Poetry of Czesław Miłosz* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p 88.

<sup>3</sup> Czesław Miłosz, “Wychowanie katolickie” [“A Catholic Upbringing”], originally published in *Rodzinna Europa* [*Familial Europe*, trans. into English as *Native Realm*], pp. 61-77. Our text comes from Miłosz, *Metafizyczna pauza* [*A Metaphysical Pause*] (Kraków: Znak, 1989), pp. 29-49, p. 44.

<sup>4</sup> Miłosz, speech at Catholic University of Lublin, cited by Joanna Gromek in her introduction to *Metafizyczna pauza*, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Both writers discussed in Miłosz’s famous *Zniewolony umysł* [*Captive Mind*].

<sup>6</sup> See Eliot’s 1935 essay “Religious Literature,” Frank Kermode, ed. *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), p. 100.

<sup>7</sup> *Metafizyczna pauza*, p. 118.

<sup>8</sup> Interesting in this very regard is the case of that most talented and most intriguing of all the Beats, Jack Kerouac. Whatever his spiritual peregrinations may have been, Kerouac never succeeded in completely suppressing his Catholic upbringing. This can be found in many passages of his autobiographically-fueled work; readers of Kerouac will of course recall the harrowing, nearly psychotic experience toward the end of *Big Sur*, when the only thing that calms the narrator assailed by an inimical world is the sudden vision of the Cross in the skies. Near the same passage, there occurs an interesting Freudian slip; Kerouac awakes in the night certain that his houseguests are conspiring against him, “because I am a Catholic.” It is an interesting confession, at a moment of hyper-tension, when truths are usually squeezed out of us in a panic. But however “Catholic” Kerouac may have been in his personal beliefs or psychic makeup, Kerouac the author of some of the, gently speaking, syncretistic poems in the *Book of Sketches* cannot be considered a Catholic by the widest stretch of the imagination.

<sup>9</sup> I give one example of the danger a critic runs by relying on translations, rather than original poems. The English version of “Po ziemi naszej” as printed in the (revised) edition of Miłosz’s *Selected Poems* (New York: Ecco Press, 1980), mistranslates the Polish word *plaszcz* (cloak) as “clock.” And so, in the concluding lines of verse nr. 12 on p. 87 we have mention of the Indians of the California coast sewing “a clock from the plumage of flickers, / hummingbirds, and tanagers.” Now, the Native Americans may have been expert avian tailors, but clockmakers? And out of *feathers*?

# CHAPTER ONE

## YOUTH AND WAR: 1933-1945

In terms of historical significance, Czesław Miłosz is the one of the few peers of T.S. Eliot among contemporary poets. Like Eliot, he was a Nobel prize winner; more importantly, like Eliot, he has enjoyed a significance of influence beyond the confines of his own language, affecting the work of poets who might perhaps never have glanced toward Poland had it not been for his poetry. Such is the conclusion that Václav Burian, Czech poet and translator, came to after learning of Miłosz's passing in 2004, amidst the controversy surrounding his funeral: "How many of us, foreigners, came to love Poland in no small measure thanks to the Not-quite-Polish-enough Miłosz!"<sup>1</sup> Among Anglophone poets influenced by Miłosz might be named: Robert Pinsky, Robert Hass, and Seamus Heaney, himself a member of the exclusive Stockholm club. No mean feat for a person exclusively, stubbornly, devoted to composing in the parochial language of Polish despite (and perhaps ironically because of) a three-decade-long exile in California.

One would be hard put to find a person familiar with the topic who would suggest another candidate for the title of "most important figure in 20<sup>th</sup> century Polish literature." Yet no sooner had Miłosz passed away in Kraków on August 14, 2004, at the age of 93, than a firestorm broke out in the Polish press. Contrary to the wishes of the poet, who wanted to be buried in his family's plot in Lithuania, the "representatives of the intellectual and cultural milieu of Kraków,"<sup>2</sup> in concert with the municipal authorities of Miłosz's adopted city, decided upon an elaborate funeral with the Krypta Zasłużonych [Crypt of the Meritorious], the Polish pantheon at the Church "Na Skałce" in the shadow of Wawel Castle, as his final resting place.

One might wonder why the controversy arose in the first place. Yet, oddly enough, poetry had nothing to do with it. It was a nationalistic-patriotic affair, ignited by an interview given by a retired professor of Polish literature from Kraków, on the pages of *Nasz dziennik* [*Our Daily*],

a periodical of a strong nationalistic (some would say xenophobic) character. In the interview,<sup>3</sup> it was suggested that the poetry of Miłosz is anything but “Polish” in the patriotic sense of the word, and for that reason, he does not deserve interment alongside the more “acceptable” artists resting in the crypts of the Pauline church.

The controversy is long over. The funeral went off without a hitch: the streets of Kraków were filled to overflowing with people paying their last respects to the so-called “Prince of Poets,” and giving vibrant witness to the overwhelming opinion of Miłosz’s countrymen concerning his person, his significance, and the debt owed to his memory. We mention it here for one reason and one reason only. While the main thrust of the hubbub was political, i.e. “Was Miłosz Polish enough to be buried in so exalted a locale,” nearly everyone overlooked the more salient question: “Was Miłosz Catholic enough to be buried in a church?”<sup>4</sup> Ironically, this question seems to have nagged Miłosz himself. For at the poet’s funeral, a telegram from Pope John Paul II was read aloud, in which it was revealed that Miłosz had written a letter to the Holy Father—the last letter he wrote to him—in which he basically asked for an *imprimatur* and *nihil obstat* after the fact, as it were, concerning the Catholicity of his writings. John Paul quoted the salient part of Miłosz’s letter:

“Wiek zmienia perspektywę i kiedy byłem młody zwracanie się przez poetę o błogosławieństwo papieskie uchodziło za niestosowność. A to właśnie jest przedmiotem mojej troski, bo w ciągu ostatnich lat pisałem wiersze z myślą o nieodbieganiu od katolickiej ortodoksji i nie wiem, jak w rezultacie to wychodziło. Proszę więc o słowa potwierdzające moje dążenie do wspólnego nam celu. Oby spełniła się obietnica Chrystusowa w dzień Zmartwychwstania Pańskiego.”<sup>5</sup>

[As one ages, one’s perspective changes. When I was young, it was considered unseemly for a poet to ask the Pope for his blessing. And yet this is now the object of my concern, for over the last few years I have striven to write poetry that should not depart from Catholic orthodoxy, and I don’t know how successful I have been. I humbly beg therefore of a word or two confirming my striving towards our common goal. May the promises of Christ be fulfilled on the day of His Resurrection.]

Yet why should Miłosz feel compelled to write his letter to the Pope in the first place? At the risk of being accused ourselves of piling up citations out of context, we offer the following few examples from Miłosz’s prose, indicative of the pull he sometimes felt towards gnosticism, dualism, and Manicheism. In 1977, he wrote in *Ziemia Ulro* [*The Land of Ulro*]: “In my opinion, [...] a certain Manichean component is necessary to us, and

difficult to avoid.”<sup>6</sup> The itch toward dualistic thinking makes its appearance in his prose even earlier, in that *annus horribilis* that was 1969, which Miłosz witnessed from the very front lines at UC Berkeley. In *Visions from San Francisco Bay*, a book of essays published that year, he writes:

One way or the other, I bear the stamp of civilization, and if I guard against using standards which are too human, the alien Other besieges me all the more and I can derive no law for myself from its laws. My contemporaries (strongly affected by Manichaeism, and, like it or not, I am one of them), have moved far from any doctrines espousing harmony with nature and the wise acceptance of its rhythms as a guide to behavior; paralyzed by the animal in themselves (once caged in by the Soul, Reason), they have sought the Spirit passionately, but since God has been withdrawing, losing His attributes, Spirit can now be only human, the sole maker of distinctions between good and evil, set in opposition to a universe which knows neither good nor evil. Though suspicious of what I have received from other people while living among them—listening to their lectures, submitting to their influences—I do discover in myself a deep-rooted conviction of aloneness, mine and man’s, in the face of limitless space, in motion yet empty, from which no voice reaches down speaking a language I can feel and understand.<sup>7</sup>

Later in the same text, he speaks even more clearly:

I am, thus, frankly pessimistic in appraising life, for it is chiefly composed of pain and the fear of death, and it seems to me that a man who has succeeded in living a day without physical suffering should consider himself perfectly happy. The Prince of This World is also the Prince of Lies and the Prince of Darkness. The old Iranian myths about the struggle of Darkness with Light, Ahriman against Ormazd, suit me perfectly.<sup>8</sup>

But dualistic thought, if we are to consider such sentiments to be of good coin, and not ironic, has been with the poet since his youth. In one of his latter prose works, his personal encyclopedia Miłosz’s ABC, he speaks of the effect that the sudden death of his school friend Alik Protasiewicz had on him. It was, he says there, “my first encounter with the cruelty of God.”<sup>9</sup> As late as 1991, in an interview with Adam Michnik, in response to the question “Have you always been a believer?” he answered:

Not at all. A woman friend of mine, who’s no longer living, once wrote to me, “Your whole life, you have always said both yes and no.” This reminds me of Pascal’s idea that “to believe, to err, to doubt, are to man what running is to a horse.”<sup>10</sup>

These are not excerpts from his poetry or occasional fiction. Thus, we are deprived of the handy rationalization that the speaker of such words is not necessarily the writer. These are all excerpts from Miłosz's essays, and essays, especially autobiographical ones, always invite us to trust the author to reveal what he actually is thinking, straightforwardly, and without any literary sleight of hand. Such essays are, really, letters to the editor writ large.

We offer them here not as ammunition for those who would exclude Miłosz from the bosom of the Church to which he felt such a strong attachment and responsibility in his latter days, that he would even approach the Holy Father himself with what can only be understood as an anguished plea for understanding and recognition. We set them out only so as to underscore the logic of those who reacted with astonishment to the burial plans of this man who seemed, at times, so very heterodox. I am speaking here only of those who read his works, not those larger mobs who, affected by what was written in *Nasz dziennik*, or by simple hearsay, casually joined in the damning chorus. For such were the opinions of Czesław Miłosz, disseminated in print, and thus accessible, to those who chose to read them. His letter to John Paul II, so different in tenor from anything that had earlier come from his pen, was a private communication and unavailable to anyone, until it was read on the day of his funeral, over his coffin in the Basilica of St. Mary on the Main Market Square. It comes as no surprise that it was greeted with amazement, and perhaps a number of cynical grins, by those who knew the poet only from his public writings.

It was another side of the complicated person that was Czesław Miłosz, the private man and the anxious seeker, that was revealed at the funeral. In the words of Archbishop Józef Życiński, who gave the homily at the funeral Mass:

Czesław Miłosz's searchings in the theological depths were difficult for those accustomed to the differing patterns of laicized culture to understand. In 1978, when his collection *Bells in Winter* appeared in English, Leonard Nathan, an American critic, asked the poet why he so often introduces religious themes to his works. In reply he heard, "Oh, well. I am a member of the Roman Catholic Church." That difference of perspective in the grasping of the phenomenon of Miłosz teaches us humility, reminding us, that no one is in the position to impose his or her own "uniquely valid and proper" interpretation of this poetry, as the riches of its contents pass beyond simple interpretative schematics.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, an asterisk needs to be placed against the last sentences of the Archbishop's sermon. In his justified desire to guard against the oversimplified, uncontextualized partisan attacks that so sadly marred the passing of the great poet, the Archbishop (forgivably, himself not being a literary critic) comes close to endorsing the undergraduate fallacy that no "proper" interpretations of poetry are possible—that criticism is an exercise in subjectivity. That, of course, is patently untrue, and in our consideration of Czesław Miłosz as a Catholic poet, we will be bold to set forth our interpretations of his art, which, while not claiming exclusivity, will certainly claim to be proper in that they are based firmly upon the texts themselves. What Archbishop Życiński does well to remind us of, however, is the critic's obligation of humility. As in the case of another great man who toyed with Manicheanism, St. Augustine, in Miłosz "there beat a restless heart in search of God,"<sup>12</sup> and our consideration of his poetry, chronological in the main, will be to follow the process which was Miłosz's search until he was finally able to jettison his gnostic baggage and declare himself the "master of vanquished despair."<sup>13</sup> In this way, Miłosz may appear to us as the most open of all poets claiming to be Catholics; an artist who, like Augustine in his *Confessions*, lays bare before us his struggles and missteps, as well as his triumphs and teachings. Perhaps we shall see that, in the end, the "private" Miłosz was speaking to us all the while.

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The caesuras in Czesław Miłosz's life are many, and more than one of them coincides with the history of the twentieth century. Few of the tragedies that effected Europe, especially Central and Eastern Europe, during the past century failed to leave their scars on his back. When in the late 1960s he facilitated the recordings of Aleksander Wat's memoirs, later published with the title *Mój wiek* [*My Century*], in a very real sense, Miłosz might appropriate this title to sum up his own poetic output, which was especially attuned to, and affected by, the history that swept round him, and swept him from place to place on its current. For this reason, it is proper to consider his poetry in a generally chronological fashion. This first chapter concerns the writings of the young poet—a young poet forced to grow up fast indeed because of three wars, one socialist revolution, and a double-occupation of his homeland that was to last for fifty years. During this first period, Miłosz grew to adulthood in his native Lithuania, studied at the Stefan Batory University in Wilno (Vilnius), traveled to Paris and Italy, returned to Warsaw to work in Polish Radio, and,



eventually, survived World War II in Poland, a nation tortured by Nazi and Soviet like no other during that period. It comprises three main collections of his verse: the prewar *Poemat o czasie zastygłym* [*A Poem on Frozen Time*, 1933], *Trzy zimy* [*Three Winters*, 1936] and the postwar *Ocalenie* [*Rescue*, 1945]. Of these three, the first, *Poemat o czasie zastygłym*, is not only the most youthful, it is also the most concerned with social questions and least with religion.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, our discussion will concentrate mainly on the second two, in which the young poet matures, very quickly, to a consideration of questions of a more general and metaphysical cast.

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Gnosticism of all stripes forms a necessarily dualistic system. In its more drastic forms, it sets up an eternal dance of a “good” god in opposition to a “bad” god, and even if the cataclysmic denouement is to result in the victory of the good god of light over the bad god of darkness, this optimistic resolution is stall far off in the future; all that a human being knows here below is the interminable dance. This metaphysical situation panders to a natural, pessimistic resignation, and the solace it offers is that admitted to by Miłosz himself in his above-cited comments on Iranian cosmogony. In those gnostic sects that call themselves Christian, the dualistic split usually comes between matter and spirit, with the former being rejected as necessarily evil, and the latter adhered to as good. Now, despite all his cynical or exasperated declarations of Manicheanism, the young narrator of Miłosz’s poems is, rather, Christian through and through; almost despite himself, one might say. For even at those passes where he seems to balance matter and spirit against one another, his devotion to the material world comes out on top; he displays a healthy devotion to tactile reality.

Because that’s what weeks, months and years are for; and the pain of wisdom / so we might learn to call a tree a tree, a man a man, and a star, a star.<sup>15</sup>

Thus read lines 21-22 of “Dytyramb” [“Dithyramb”]. Where gnostics worthy the name find their salvific “wisdom” in esoteric, hidden “knowledge” which has little, if anything, to do with the reality of the world they wish to impose it upon, here the narrator sets forth a purely Christian path toward knowledge, which begins with a basic, tautological understanding of the created world. As he puts it in the earlier verse “Rano” [“Morning”], though with a youthful enthusiasm that leads him

near a crowding out of the spirit himself, in preference to his subjectively enjoyed physical existence:

I love matter, which is nothing other than a spinning mirror. / I love the movement of my blood, the only cause of the world's existence. / I believe in the destructibility of all that exists. So as not to lose my path, I have on my hand a blue map of veins. (15-18)

Czech poet Růžka Preisner, Miłosz's junior by thirteen years, was to express a similar thought to that found in "Dithyramb" decades later in his *Kritika totalitarismu* [*Critique of Totalitarianism*]:

In certain sublime moments, if I smell a flower, say, dig my fingers into hot sand, pass my hand over the rough surface of a cliff or gaze at the pebbly bed of a shallow stream, it seems to me, not literally, of course, but all the same, as if I became again the child I was. Now, when I think more closely upon this phenomenon, it always occurs to me that *real* childhood, its foundation, is to be found in an absolutely unique observation of the essence of being. Here at last I begin to sense the real significance of the words of Christ, "unless you become as little children..."<sup>16</sup> that is, unless you come to look upon and acknowledge being, the creative opus of God the Father, you will not enter into the kingdom of Heaven. In adulthood, the child's manner of considering being and existence can develop into a reappraisal, a recognition of existence and being. In this sense, philosophers of *ens* are really just grown-up children.<sup>17</sup>

Miłosz develops a similar thought in lines 35-44 of the poem under our present consideration:

And so we begin the splendid journey, amazed, that one has to wait so long / for beauty, which ought to be visible, / and easy, even for a child. For that new order / of forms reborn, greedily expressing / the truth, which ought to shake the continents, while she / arrives quietly and evening is no longer evening, / burden no longer burden / and destiny no longer that same destiny. / For the bolt falls and splits the earthen house. / Good is here and evil is here. And immortality awaits.

Tangible reality—it is interesting how both poets suggest that this is a matter of common sense, accessible even to children—is the basis and foundation of all metaphysics, indeed of all human behavior. Right is here, wrong is there, and it takes no great intellectual effort to recognize the difference and choose between them. Preisner, speaking of Plato and his idealism, writes:

Now, the struggle for transcendence first presented Plato with a vastly intricate challenge: to prove the relation between absolute being (the ideal) and transitory being, the foundation of all ontology; to explain how it is possible that transitory phenomena not only can, but *must* have a basis in non-transitory being. Here, for the first time, philosophy passed from the cleverness of the Sophists to what Plato called wisdom.<sup>18</sup>

Miłosz too leaves little room for relativism. If he does at times wheel close to pessimism, it is a pessimism of exasperation, irritated by his fellow human beings' inability to grasp what is obvious to the smallest child. The Christian viewpoint shared by both poets is summed up by Miłosz in his parable "Słońce" ["The Sun"], a short poem bearing the date "Warsaw, 1943," which brings the cycle "Świat (poema naiwne)" ["The World (a Naïve Verse Cycle)"] to a close:

Whoever wishes to paint the world in a colorful figure, / let him never look directly at the sun. / Because he will forget the memories of things he has seen, / and all that will remain in his eyes will be burning tears. // Let him rather fall to his knees, bend his face to the grass / and gaze at the sunbeam reflected from the earth. / There he will find everything that we have abandoned: / Stars and roses, and dusks and dawns. (5-12)

There is a metaphysical reality, as well as a purely physical sphere, that makes up our life here on earth. Both of these are knowable—to an adequate degree—and the pursuit of this knowledge is a requisite of the good life; for on our proper understanding of eternal truths depend our proper actions in our daily lives. Yet to arrive at that knowledge, our journey toward immortality, noted in "Dytyramb," must begin at the proper setting-off point: from here, real temporality, to there, the as yet ungrasped eternal—and not the other way around.<sup>19</sup> It is a trip for which the children and the childlike are best suited, with their "naïve" and practical approach to the world. The "great and wise," who are often too wise for their own good, are more likely to lose their way at the very start by setting up an orientation point too high to be measured with their puny instruments of triangularization.

At this point, a slight digression may be in order. In our desire to separate the poetic persona of the speaker from the real person of the poet, we run the risk, in the next few chapters, of applying the doctrine of "inner orthodoxy" a bit too widely, too early. It is important to recall that in Miłosz's letter to the Pope, in which he speaks of the Catholic strivings of his latter writings, the important term is "latter writings." Critics such as Adam Czerniawski remind us that, whatever his religious or devotional practices throughout his life, Miłosz's philosophical return to Catholicism

was an occurrence of his later years.<sup>20</sup> It is not necessarily true that Miłosz's claim that non-Catholic expressions in his poetry do not reflect the Catholic viewpoints he actually holds as a man ("inner orthodoxy"), which applies to his later years, applies equally to his earlier, pre-1990s years. This is because, in so many places, he suggests that he rebelled against Christianity and the Church as a young man. Thus far our *caveat lector*. By the same token, it is surprising how very Christian many of his earlier poems sound, despite this fact; looked at chronologically, it almost seems that the closer Miłosz drew to the Catholic Church, the more ambivalently Christian, not to say unchristian, are the expressions found in his poetry.

To return to the topic at hand, again, Miłosz's narrator is not rejecting the ideal in favor of the real, rather, he is setting forth the proper manner of obtaining it. At such moments, the voice he employs takes on the mantle of the prophet. In the poem "20 lutego 1938 roku" ["February 20, 1938"], he writes:

When the fires are finally quiet, and the springtime sobbing / arises over  
the earth, pure, washed free of the dust of battles, / When the hymn of  
thanksgiving rumbles, and the wheat of the fields / will be like the grace of  
God, a greeting of love, // Then, Jarosław, the Lord of Glory will come /  
and bend His wise brows over the book of the dead / and He will ask—He  
alone—did we believe / in a greater truth, in the holiness of this land so  
gracious.(1-8)

It is important to note that the narrator here emphasizes the unique right of the "king of glory," i.e. Christ, to pose the question of faith, of orientation, as He bends over the "book of the dead." Although the question is directed at our appreciation of the sanctity of the earth, at bottom it is He who becomes the implied orientation point to which all compasses on this earthly march must be set:

And so we, if there exists in us faith in real time, / in the power of  
unearthly tenancy, in the gift of vision, / are perhaps once more baptizers  
by living water, / so that, when the Son does come, he might tear the veil  
from our eyes. (13-16)

Miłosz's devotion to the real, the tangible, is something he carries with him from his early childhood. It is the deepest characteristic of his identity as Lithuanian—along with aspects of pagan pantheism, as we will later see—expressed programmatically by the young cosmopolitan, who visited both Paris and Italy before the war, in the long poem "Hymn:"

[...] I, faithful son of the black earth, will return to the black earth, / as if life had never been, / as if song and word were created / not by my heart, not by my blood, / not by my enduring, / but by an unknown voice, impersonal, / the very smack of the waves, the very choir of the winds, the very autumnal swaying / of high trees. (11-18)

It is not without import that the narrator here describes himself as a “faithful son of the black earth,” for a few lines down, he will state that he “has no faith.” No religious faith? No faith in anything beyond himself? We can at least say that Miłosz’s metaphysics here is something rooted in tangible reality—the narrator of this poem is just as natural and organic a growth of that “black earth” as the trees to which he lends his voice. In his later poetry, we will see the elder Miłosz speaking of “someone else” expressing things through him. At that time, in his California despair, that “voice” will be darker, perhaps menacing. Here, he makes himself a reed in the mouth of pure nature—the scission of his poetic voice—pantheistic here—has not yet taken on a demonic timbre.

Insofar as his narrator can be identified with himself, Miłosz suggests in his early poetry that his devotion to reality, to real nature, is something given him by his mother, whom, in contrast to his father (whom he recalls as a man of culture, a guide to the adventure that is the wide world outside, but through books)<sup>21</sup>—he remembers in colors that identify her strongly with nature. Witness “Przy piwoniach” [“By the Peonies”] from that cycle “Świat:”

The peonies are blooming, white and rose, [...] // My mother stands near the bed of peonies, / reaches for one and bends apart its petals, / gazing long into the flowery nations, / for which a moment is sometimes an entire year. // Then she lets the flower go, and what she thinks, she repeats / aloud, to the children and to herself. / And the wind rocks the green leaves, / and leopard-spots of light race over our faces. (1; 5-12)

Ewa Ślawek comments on the mother here: “Her activity is impulsive: she opens objects and considers them from the interior.”<sup>22</sup> All right, but what she says, she reveals to the children, but not to us. This is intimate and feminine; it is also a hidden knowledge, appreciable perhaps only by those “faithful sons of the black earth,” and, in that way, it is as close as Miłosz’s narrator comes at this point to the esoteric “hidden salvific knowledge” of the gnostics, whose company he was later to seek out. But unlike gnostic knowledge, this is something that *can* be apprehended by anyone who wishes to learn it: from the earth, as it arises, not from those airy ladder-filled regions of the fabricated cosmos, but from the real, tactile ground from which we, the beetles and the peonies grow.<sup>23</sup> What is

more, the mother's fecundity is that of the "black earth" itself, and she, here, is the truly organic link between him and it; she is both his actual mother, and Mother Earth.

As we have seen, perceptible nature can reveal, especially to the poet's eye, the eternal substructure that lies just beneath it. It is signpost or allegory (in Bishop Butler's sense), rather than its opposite, its concrete denial. In "Wyprawa do lasu" ["Forest Excursion"], Miłosz's narrator catches sight of the world of wonders in a spontaneous manner that recalls Gerard Manley Hopkins:

And there above us, a feast. Pitchers of gold, / red wine in birchen copper.  
/ And the chariot of the winds / carries gifts for invisible kings, or bears.  
(9-12)

And it is this aptitude for "piercing the veil," which caused Garneau so much agony; an aptitude bestowed upon Miłosz by the rural Lithuania of his youth (and, ironically, withheld at times from Garneau *despite* his fevered attachment to rural Québec),<sup>24</sup> that gives Miłosz the "power, that rips apart the world," of which he speaks in the afore-cited "Hymn:"

There is no one standing between you and me, / and power has been given me.  
/ White mountains are at pasture on the earthly plains, / they move to the sea,  
to their waterhole, / ever new suns bend down / over the valley of the small dark river where I was born.  
/ I possess neither wisdom, nor skill, nor faith / but I have been given power, and she will tear the world apart.  
(19-26)

Now, this is a "shining forth" of a different quality than that which captivates Hopkins, because, as we have already said, it is a metaphysical sense that, at times, stops at the threshold of natural wonder, and goes no further, seems unable to go any further, to contact its very center: God, Christ, Hopkins' "Grandeur of God." In this poem, written three years before the "20 II 1938" with its apocalyptic message of the Lord of Glory and its faith in a "greater truth," the poet's narrator, in Paris, says he has "no faith."<sup>25</sup> And yet to Whom is the "Hymn" addressed? Who is he calling to, what overwhelming Person, before Whom he speaks on behalf of "Youth," youth about to be trampled; completely at the behest of that Person who can give some salt, wine, bread to these, while withholding it from others?

But between states coming to existence from the depths of seas, / between extinct streets, in place of which / mountains built from a fallen world rise up, / everything, which has passed, everything which will pass / is

defended by youth, pure as solar dust, / in love neither will good, nor with evil, / stretched out beneath your giant feet / so that you might trample it, walk over it, / so that you might move the wheel with your breath / from the revolution of which the transient structure shivered, / so that you should give it (youth) hunger, and others salt, wine and bread. // [...] The voice of the horn is not yet heard / that will call together the scattered who lie in the valleys. / The wheel of the last wagon does not yet thunder over the frozen clods. / There is no one standing between you and me.] (48-58; 73-76)

If it is God that the poet is speaking to here—and who else might fit those huge footprints he is pointing at?—the seeming paradox of addressing Someone in Whom one confesses to lack faith is explained, once more, by reference to that characteristic of the young Miłosz’s writing that we see as so preeminent: tangible reality. The same—superstitious—person who would later confess to being haunted by the metaphysical consequences arising from killing a snake (looked upon benignly in rural Lithuania)<sup>26</sup> rejects “faith” as an attitude, the object of which cannot, by definition, be directly experienced by the senses. Miłosz’s narrator is not denying the existence of God here; rather, he is—overboldly, perhaps—demanding that God show Himself to him, as clearly and tangibly as that unfortunate water snake. The statement *Nikogo nie ma pomiędzy tobą i mną* [“There is nobody standing between you and me”], then, with which the poem begins and ends, is a challenge of sorts. “Look,” the narrator seems to be insisting, “there is nothing to impede Your real progress to me, nothing in the way. Come on, then, show Yourself.”

The Polish ear hears echoes of that other great Lithuanian, Adam Mickiewicz, who in the Great Improvisation scene of his drama *Dziady* [*Forefathers’ Eve*] has his poet-shaman-hero Konrad call God out in just such a manner, after just such a claim to possessing the power of tearing worlds apart.<sup>27</sup> The Catholic ear hears these implied accusations of the distance of God, and wonders—What on earth is more real and tangible than God in the Eucharist? Both Miłosz, and Descartes before him, seem to entirely overlook the “real,” objective, implications of the Sacrament of the altar.

For whatever reason, the young Miłosz is unable to see this. When he does take up the teasing question of the Incarnation—in the 1937 poem “Wcielenie”—the paradox of Christ’s dual nature will be expressed in a curious manner. God becomes man, and Miłosz sees Him as remaining so, as *needing* to remain so, in a fashion which again surprises in its devotion to matter, and in the novel moral content that flows from this.

Christ's "incarnation"—His Second Coming?—is an incarnation into the gray reality of daily twentieth-century life:

I come down to earth on such gray mornings / when the trams moan over  
the bridges / and heavy beads of water run down the handrails, / in the  
white milky mist, in the cauldron of the great waters. / Arches and towers,  
citadels stretch up / their morning song. (1-6)

Somewhat similarly to the later "Piosenka o końcu świata" ["Song of the End of the World"], where the apocalyptic day dawns amidst such quotidianity, so quietly, "no one believes, that it's happening already," 21, Christ's (re)entry into history occurs

[...] in such sleepy dawns / when the sand-men stand bending over / their  
skiffs shining on the border of shadow, and in tidepools, in steam washed  
over with icefloes, / sails, that look like smoky, unclean / flames. (7-12)

Yet unlike the end of days, life goes on. In stanzas five and six, He muses on the changing seasons—winter turns to spring, and returns again after a brief summer and autumn, nor does there seem to be any end in sight, while tłumy co roku odmieniają stroje ["the crowds change their clothing-styles every year," 33]. In "Wcielanie," Christ comes not as the King of Glory referenced earlier, to bring on a final summing-up of people and their actions in judgment, but as a quiet, unrecognized observer of the uninteresting human race, bland in its existence, and possessed of no great tragic value either, when the odd moment of mortal crisis overcomes them:

But sometimes someone's mask slides down / and they gaze upon his real  
face. / Then a great fear is felt everywhere, / and panic flies through the  
swaying crowd. / Suddenly it becomes apparent just what / this endurance  
is here, so far below: / a note plucked on a dead string / over a morass,  
where the underground labor / of whispers and giggles transfigures the  
world. (48-55)

An odd Christ this. No Redeemer He, but, in the kitschy self-description provided in lines 14-17:

[...] I am the unstable comrade / of winds grown silent, forgotten faces, /  
of ancient sighs racing through heaven, / a mere traveler who, laughing,  
dreams]



He has no desire to save, no will to redeem—indeed, just after the passage cited above, in which the crisis of one of His “brothers” is described, He confesses His powerlessness to do anything:

I make no answer to the cry. What can I do? / I comprehend neither the beginning nor the goal. The incessant cry: Saviour, / take your real reward from our hands. / Our breaths waft upon you / as we surround you in a line. / Agree. You will be stretched out far above / and wreathed, and holy above all holies. (56-63)

The poem ends with fourteen lines—two quatrains and two tercets, a perfect sonnet—in which Miłosz’s odd Christ envisages another Ascension, which in this case sounds most of all like an escape. This Christ thinks of saving no one but Himself:

Oh, my heaven! My cloudy home! / All it would take would be the strike of my sandaled heel / and I would return as if I had never lived. / For all times I will be rocked in and by you. // Oh, my heaven! I shall fly above the abyss / in the depths of which the tiny tram scuds along / and the music of brass trumpets thunders on feast-days / while bars and baths swarm with voices. // Unrighteous power holds to mercy, / I am with them, and every day they drag me along. / I serve false faiths, artificial idols. // And the Father’s whisper vainly beckons, / when I show the mark of my punctured hand, / Before we all perish in the azure. (64-77)

A frightful verse. But is it cynicism for cynicism’s sake? It is important to note that, in lines 56-63, among the things noticed by Miłosz’s Christ is contemporary Christianity. Although “they” don’t seem aware of His presence, here and now, in Warsaw, in 1937, He sees them kneel before His tabernacles and images, calling out to Him, begging Him for His aid—to take away their responsibility along with their “true reward”—to which prayers He turns a deaf ear. Why? In this verse, we come across one of the characteristics of the Christianity expressed in Miłosz’s poems that will come into sharper focus in the poems written during and after the cruel war about to be unleashed on Poland (in less than two years’ time): the truth that Christ becomes really *present* here on earth only through the Christ-like acts of real people. In both “Campo di Fiori,” and “Biedny chrześcijanin patrzy na getto” [“The Poor Christian Looks Upon the Ghetto”], two famous wartime poems that we will shortly consider, Miłosz develops the theme broached in “Wcielenie:” the individual responsibility of the Christian, the imperative of practical Christianity, practical Christ-like acts that will make the world an appreciably better place—and keep injustices such as the burning of

Giordano Bruno and the Holocaust from happening—much more surely than pious prayers and tearful petitions to God divorced from a will to act ourselves, begging Him to do the work for us.<sup>28</sup>

One can hardly conceive of a more human Christ, or a more material Savior. It is in this sense that Miłosz's Christ is helpless: nailed to a Cross and kept firmly fixed there by His followers. In the last few lines He raises His punctured hand in explanation to His “vainly calling” Father. In this sense is the unthinkable possible: Christ, or at least the Christ of pious and lazy imagination, “perishes” along with the minds of the people who created him as *Deus ex machina*, as rationalization, as excuse.

Nicely homiletic, that. Yet before we succumb to the temptation of lobbying for the poet's inclusion in the canon of inspired authors, we must note that the message he brings to the world is not always so challengingly hopeful. It's not difficult to find “despair” poems in the corpus of the young poet's works, as “Pożegnanie” [“Farewell”] bears witness. This poem, a Browningsque dramatic monologue in which the narrator addresses his son, was written in 1945, in Kraków; thus, in the medieval Polish capital to which poets like Miłosz gravitated after the conflict, from cities either destroyed by war, like Warsaw, or placed beyond the borders of Poland, and the reach of Poles, like Lwów or Wilno. The contrast between the nearly Hiroshimic destruction of Warsaw and the relatively unchanged appearance of the sleepy “little Rome” of southern Poland must have strongly affected Miłosz; indeed, this will not be the only poem in which the war is seen as an important prism for the poet's expression.

At first, an Augustinian moment transports the narrator to his happy youth. Kraków, the city before the poet's eyes, becomes Verona, a symbol of the places he loved in the halcyon days before September 1, 1939:

Children's laughter in the garden. The first, pure star / opens above the  
froth of the unblossomed hills / and again a light song returns to my lips, /  
and again I am young as I was before, in Verona. (13-16)

Yet no sooner has this *trompe-l'oeil* enraptured him, than he comes to his senses (his senses of sight and touch) and the reality he sees, so ironic in reference to the reality he has just lived through, has him reject the ideal along with his youth, for it is just as dead and unattainable as those long-past years:

Throw it away. Throw it all away. That's not *it*. / I shall neither  
resurrect, nor move backwards. / Sleep, Romeo and Juliet, on a pillow of  
broken feathers. / I shall not raise your joined hands from the ashes. / Let  
the cat visit the abandoned cathedrals / flashing its pupils on the altars. Let

the owl / make its nest on the dead ogive. // In the scorching white afternoons among the ruins, let the serpent / warm itself on the leaves of coltsfoot and in the quiet / let him twine himself round the unnecessary gold in shining rings. / I shall not return. I want to see what remains / after the casting off of Spring and youth / after the casting off of carmine lips, / from which flows a hot wave / into the humid night. (17-31)

And what remains “of life, of the apple split by the flaming knife,” 36?

My son, believe me, nothing remains. / Only the labor of manly age, / the callous of destiny on the palm. / Only labor, / nothing more. (38-42)

Nothing. Nothing at all? The person looking for nihilism in the early verse of Czesław Miłosz will have no great trouble finding it. Consider, for example, a few strophes from the “Pieśń Levallois” [“Song of Levallois”] subtitled “Baraki dla bezrobotnych w Levallois-Perret, 1935” [“Barracks for the Unemployed in Levallois-Perret, 1935”]:

They marched off at your command, / harvested grain, scratched out coal from the earth / and sometimes bathed themselves in fraternal blood / whispering the names of Jesus and Mary. // Their unconscious babble rose through the seedy dives, / and this was their song sung to your glory. / In the interior of the earth, above the abyss of the seas, / they died in dust, frost, and scorching air. [...] Take away from them the signs of sin and sickness / Lead them, free, through the gates of Sodom, / let them decorate their houses with garlands of flowers, / let them know how to live and die more lightly. (10-17; 22-25)

Cached in the form of a prayer, a petitionary hymn, the “Pieśń Levallois” contains some striking religious irony alongside the tangible sympathy of the narrator for those forced to labor in the most dire circumstances, and later reduced to crime by being deprived even of that. In lines 10-11, the theft of bread and coal to which the unemployed were constrained is compared to Christ’s harvesting of grain on the Sabbath in Matthew 12:1-8.<sup>29</sup> While the comparison may be justified on a modern, social level, what are we to do with the comparison of their blasphemous ejaculations while “washing themselves in fraternal blood,” to the frightened, whispered prayer of a (dying) man? In what way is their “unconscious babble,” 14, described as an incoherent, absurd, almost bestial groan with the overtones of inebriation suggested by their emerging from a “dive,” at all comparable to the “hymn to your glory” mentioned in the following line? If this weren’t enough to catch our attention, there is the satanic inversion, à la Baudelaire, of Paradise into

the “gates of Sodom” (23), to which they are to be admitted (perhaps less ironically, here), without any effort of penitence on their part, as the Lord is asked merely to “take away their signs of sin and sickness” in the line preceding.

Still and all, as we read through the first six stanzas of the poem, we turn a patient eye upon the sentiments that, however strong, remind us of the earthy religiosity of François Villon. But then we come to stanza seven:

Darkness. Silence. A bridge plays<sup>30</sup> far away. / The wind in the Cainish trees blows in a constant stream. / Above the desert of the world, above the tribe of humanity, / There is no mercy for Levallois. (26-29)

The narrator no longer hides his irony. The song, which begins with the plea “Lord, have mercy on Levallois,” ends with the blunt statement of the absence of God, or, at least, the absence of God’s goodness (“there is no mercy for Levallois”), which is really one and the same thing.

Here, the narrator’s empathy for the Paris poor leads him to challenge God openly. In war verses, such as “Rzeka” [“The River”] dated Warsaw, 1940, human suffering and the catastrophe of defeat lead him to similar utterances, in which the narrator expresses not only the absence of God, but the absence of that analogical realm of wonders behind the reality to which he is so devoted. Addressing the “blue-eyed” river Wisła [Vistula], so often personified and endowed with a magical presence in the verse of Polish poets, he says:

[...] we know what you are: a frightful, empty river, / flooding the plains, gazing from time immemorial / on a land of wrong and sorrow.(7-9)

The landscape she flows through is a “flat land, trampled underfoot,” 18-19. Above the group of slave-laborers marching single-file beneath the threatening crop of a Nazi overseer, there are “Deaf and dumb heavens, dead; no divine signal / Will fall upon their bowed heads like lightning.” 52-53. Obviously, one might suggest. Even the most fervent believer doesn’t expect miracles, doesn’t expect God’s direct intervention in man’s history, any more. But the fact that the narrator mentions this leads us to question his motives. Is he stating bald fact, or is he shaking his fist at God?

All the same, in general, the narrator found in the poems of the early Miłosz is a creature of faith; he struggles with despair, and almost always comes down on the side of affirmation, desperate affirmation, rather than an affirmation of despair. This is true of the early dialogue verse “Pieśń”

["Song"] from 1934, in which "She" replies to the hedonistic nihilism of the chorus ("All joy comes of the earth; there is no joy except the earth, / man is given over to the earth; let him desire nothing else but the earth," 17-18) with a fervent prayer:

[...] Thou, O God, be merciful unto me. / Tear me from the greedy lips of earth. / Purify me from her untruthful songs (26-28);

it is true, even perhaps more wonderfully so, in "Kraina poezji" ["The Land of Poetry"], a poem written in the dark night of wartime 1942:

If in the June night there resounds / a buzz, a dumbledore strikes the violin's string, / or a cat's claw runs across a keyboard, / you can trust them—/ Go, follow, before they grow silent. (5-9)

There is a spark in such sudden spurts of wonder that, if "followed," will lead us from the simple truth of tangible reality to deeper truths that lie beneath the surface of what we see and feel—even if those truths are only a heightened awareness of life, and its fragility in the face of sudden-falling, unexpected extinction. Even such a slim perspective of hope will not allow Miłosz's narrator to despair. We find the strongest expression of this in the calm lines of the triad "Wiara," "Nadzieja," "Miłość" ["Faith," "Hope," "Love"] from the cycle *Świat* [*The World*]. "What has no shadow, has no strength to be" the narrator states in the final, twelfth line of "Wiara," underscoring in a programmatic manner his devotion to matter. This theme forms the *envoi* of "Nadzieja," which begins with a categorical denial of eastern metaphysics:

Hope exists, as long as one believes, / that the world is not a dream, but a living body, / and that neither sight, nor touch, nor hearing lie. / And all things, which I came to know here / are like a garden, when you stand at the gate. (1-5)

This in turn—almost paradoxically—emphasizes the narrator's conviction in a higher reality beyond this garden of matter:

You can't enter it. But it is, for sure. / If we gazed at it, better and more wisely, / we'd see within the garden of the world / more than one new flower, more than one star. (6-9)

Yet this is no paradox, but an affirmation of the traditional, western, Christian idea of that second, spiritual plane which cannot be attained

during this life, but which still will only be arrived at by virtue of our living this life:

Some say, that our eye deceives us, / and that there is no garden, that there only seems to be. / But it is these very people who have no hope. / They think that when a person turns his back, / the entire world behind him ceases at once to exist / as if it were snatched away by a thief's hands. (10-15)

The revulsion aroused in the narrator by the Buddhist (for example) theories of the world's unreality and the deceptive nature of our senses—he would feel cheated, were such a thing true, as if something were stolen from him—leads, curiously, not to a self-absorption with his own person and the world he would reserve for his own consumption, but to his acknowledgement of a greater, mystical plan for creation, in which he has his own role to play:

Love means to look at one's self / just as one looks at foreign objects, / for you are only one thing among many. / And he who looks in this way, although he may not know it, / cures his heart of various worries. / The bird and the tree say to him: friend. ("Love," 1-6)

And thus are we led by these Franciscan sentiments, in a pleasing, circular fashion (which circle here signifies wholeness, eternity, and definitely not the eastern "eternal wheel of becoming" that must be broken by the savant), to the theme of "Wiara," i.e. faith itself:

Faith happens when someone sees / a tiny leaf on the water or a drop of dew / and knows, that they are—because they must be. / Even if one should close one's eyes in dream, / on the earth there will only be that which always was, / and the leaf will be moved on further by the waters of the river. // Faith happens also when a person wounds / his foot against a rock, and knows, that rocks / are here for us to wound our feet against. (1-9)

How far we are from any matter-despising gnosticism, or any "gnosis" whatsoever. For it is not the understanding that is finally appealed to in these verses, it is sense, humble acknowledgement. As he writes in the concluding lines of "Miłość," "It matters not, that sometimes one doesn't know, what (or why) to serve: / It's not he who understands, who serves the best," 9-10.

Another aspect of this sense of significance of plan, hidden beneath the surface of the tangible world, is that which is commonly referred to as the

“catastrophism” of the young poet from Wilno. There is a strong current of the prophetic running through the poems of the young Czesław Miłosz—often seemingly against his will, and rarely (though hardly “never”), boding a bright future. In a poem written in Paris, 1935, entitled “Powrót” [“Return”], the poet presents us with an apocalyptic event. At first, it seems as benign and sunny as any crossing of the Jordan in any yearning Negro spiritual:

And friends will congregate on the banks of the great river, / as friends  
should always congregate; / they will toss upon the ground their treasures  
from the far-off Indian seas, / and cover the golden tables with winding  
sheets. (5-8)

But in the end, following that image of winding sheets (or perhaps in contrast to it!), we have a cloudy image of a world being swept away, a parting, and—what is worse—a sweeping away of meaning. All that remains are ashes and the hollow sense of time’s inexorable passage:

The stars will swoop low, spies of foreign worlds, / and suddenly all will  
fall to pieces; the day will hardly dawn. / There have been ashes, dream  
and nightmare. Nineveh has been broken. / Farewell, ah, farewell—the  
snow is already falling. (13-16)

It should not surprise us that a young, sensitive person who survived, as a child, the Soviet revolution, World War One, the Polish-Soviet conflict of the early twenties, and who watched—from both sides of the yard, so to speak—Hitler’s rise to power in Germany, should be filled with grim foreboding. “Postój zimowy” [“Winter Stoppage”], dated “Warsaw, 1938,” ends with a clearly apocalyptic image of the coming catastrophe—the metaphysical upshot of which, positive or negative, life-giving or leading to extinction, is still beyond his comprehension:

Immense waters, cities wrapped in fog, / the frigid sign of war which burns  
in the heavens—but I will be satisfied with nothing, / and thus both of us  
will wait on / for the sharp ray, which splits us open, / I don’t know,  
whether when one lives, or whether when one dies. (27-32)

Characteristically, Miłosz’s narrator escapes for aid to Nature. The poem ends with a gentle hint of acceptance of, acquiescence to, a plan guiding Nature and humanity to a foreseen goal:

Thou good winter, wrap us round in white. / For each moment of our  
awakening awaits. / Cleanse thou the ancient sorrows from our faces, / for

we are to travel together, and the road is long. / And may the time of golden grace be fulfilled. (33-37)

There is, of course, no way to prepare fully for the decisive moment. It will fall upon us unawares. In “Równina” [“The Plain”], from 1941, he notes:

Neither the pillar of revelations, nor the bush of Moses / will not flame up on the edges of the horizon. / Those, whose backs<sup>31</sup> the wind covers with leaves, / did not know, either. (13-16)

The moment will be marked by:

An unknown element, such a dark terror / for the elderly, standing before the great plain, / a flash in the horses’ fetters, in the horns of the sleepy herds / burns just the same, and they see in the clouds / the innocent crime. (36-40)

Innocent, for inevitable? Rather, potentially innocent, as a sacrifice—from the perspective of those who were victimized, innocents, by the crime.

The only manner of preparing for the event, which is to arrive as a thief in the night, is to be aware of the eventual onset, to expect it at all times. Although Miłosz does not openly refer to a Christian preparation for catastrophe in this poem, he does conclude the verse with a pulse of hope that has promising eschatological overtones:

A toppled plough on the hard path, / rabbit tracks in the dew. / And the rainbow breaks through, an arch pierced by a bird, / from an unknown earth, into heavens unknown. (41-44)

It is the sort of apocalyptic reminder for everyday readiness that informs the narrator’s voice in “Piosenka o końcu świata” [“A Song on the End of the World”], which opens the marvelous cycle *Głosy biednych ludzi* [*Voices of the Poor*], and makes of Miłosz’s narrator a voice crying in the wilderness of the twentieth century.

On the day the world ends / bees hover over nasturtiums, / a fisherman repairs his shining seine. / Dolphins jump about gaily in the ocean, / young sparrows grip the gutters, / and the serpent has golden skin, just as he should. // On the day the world ends / women walk about the fields under parasols, / the drunkard falls asleep on the edge of the lawn, / hawkers of vegetables cry about the streets / and a boat with a golden sail approaches



the island. / The sounds of a violin endure in the air / and unlatches the starry night. (1-13)

Not with a bang, Miłosz nods in agreement with Eliot, but with a whimper. And at that, a whimper so soft as to go unnoticed by many:

And those who were waiting for lightning bolts and thunder / are disappointed. / And those who were waiting for signs and archangelic trumpets / don't believe that it's happening now. / As long as the sun and moon are above, / as long as the bumblebee visits the rose, / as long as pink children are born, / no one believes that it's happening now. // Only a gray old man, who would be a prophet, / but is not a prophet, because he has other things to do, / mutters, tying up the tomato plants: / there won't be any other end of the world, / there won't be any other end of the world. (14-26)

Those for whom the “end of the world” appears as universal conflagration, in which all questions will have their proper answer, all goats will be separated decisively from the sheep, he reminds of the personal apocalypse that comes to everyone at the moment of individual death—a day of judgment no less important than the Last one, yet ignored or brushed aside by so many. It is this sense of wonder at the spiritual dullness of the modern world, of the calluses that have grown around the souls and consciences of so many, that informs the earlier verse “Jak władcy” [“Like Rulers”], from 1938, which ends with just such acute emptiness:

And when, instead of with palms, as it was at the dawn of the faith, / we enter the darkness of the erotic steps with a bundle of black, / the clocks play no promises of truth, / no flash of light veils the heads of the crucified gods. // —O white statue mine, it is not time that terrifies me / nor the passage of springs nor the brooks of death, / but the premature peace of this wisdom of ours, / and the fact that all earthly paradises are vain. // The fact that one can visit Hell and Heaven, and then in the hour / when the sun makes ruddy the morning star of the waters, / sleep, our cheek resting on our elbow, in the smoke of wet sands / forgetting the speech in which the saved dream. // Here a mountain of angels sinks along with the little cloud, / its brittle form forgets the body forever / and the light of day wanders over the great screen / behind which lies a beauty terrible, though different. // Like children, droning the words of a prayer / or old folks thumbing yellowed prayerbooks with moistened thumbs, / near the waves that crash loudly against the shore, / we know that the mystery will not reveal itself to us. (37-56)

To suggest that this is nihilism would be to miss the point entirely,<sup>32</sup> or, at best, tell only half the story. For the nihilism is not that of a world devoid of sense or the presence of God, but rather the subjective nihilism of the dull human heart, unable to approach spiritualia at any meaningful level. Czesław Miłosz, early Polish reader and translator of T.S. Eliot, refers in his early verse many times to the Waste Land. Yet like Eliot, even in that dry desert land, he does not completely despair of oases; he does not despair of finding a way out of the wastes, no matter how trackless they seem.

For the early Miłosz, confronted with the unstable world of the 1930s and torn by the Baroque simultaneous attraction and repulsion of Paris, Nature is his great ally in the struggle against despair. In “W malignie 1939” [“In a Fever, 1939”], he writes:

It’s not because I have no faith—/ there is perhaps one power, and that is  
the power of delight. / but only the black earth proffers each book of life /  
its title. (1. 18-21)

In the fourth verse of this cycle, dated Warsaw, 1940, he addresses the “pure countryside” in a manner that strongly recalls the angelic salutation:

Purest countryside, full of joy, / the wool of your misty fields sways  
gently. / Mother of gaiety” (4. 1-3)

and concludes with a blessing of “men of good will,” in which an apocalyptic judgment—though not devoid of a moral, human imperative—seems part of the natural turning of the seasons:

Eternal peace to men of good will. / To everyone, who wishes to learn the  
truth of the earth, / until, as the wheat is separated from the chaff, / evil  
will be separated from good. (4. 19-22)

It is characteristic of his early verse, this faith in the goodness of Nature, which, though not indicative of pantheism *per se*, still presents Nature as a living Person, or Communion of Saints, which can be invoked for intercession and protection. “Oh, star, protect us—from happiness and peace,” 42: so ends the 1937 verse “Siena,” dated “Italy-Silesia.” A year later, in the previously referenced “Postój zimowy,” he addresses Winter as he would a saint:

Thou good winter, wrap us round in white. / For each moment of our  
awakening awaits. / Cleanse thou the ancient sorrows from our faces, / for

we are to travel together, and the road is long. / And may the time of golden grace be fulfilled. (33-37)

The invocation of Nature found in these verses is a conscious evocation of the narrator's childhood and youth. It is a return to the sane, warm, holy and familiar epoch of a safe childhood. His "List I/I 1935 r." ["Letter I/I 1935"], a poem indicative of a dedication to faith regardless, ends with an invocation of a mother and (no coincidence here) strong, peaceful Nature, indifferent to man's self-inflicted worries, sublimely detached from them:

Thou my predatory evening, die away, I say; thou my night, arise like the dawn—/ And it was necessary to pass through orchards filled with apples / through years of low-lying smokes, writing of poetry, / through some Boufałowa St., Dobra St., / or steep rue Lepic—/ for mother to sew a black cross onto one's shirt, to protect one from death / to bake sweet bread to nourish us, / and give with veiny hand the sign for her son to disappear. // Already the wind flying over the empty earth combs the dry grass, / the dear sun wheels about, above the empty fallow land. // Nothing will stifle the bird, which understands no speech. / Great hawks fly above the pure countryside. (39-50)

With the experience of war, however, there comes a re-evaluation of this philosophy, and a turn toward a greater Guarantor of good and justice than merely sublime, indifferent Nature. The first poem in the 1943-44 cycle *Pieśni Adriana Zielińskiego* [Songs of Adrian Zieliński] affirms the triumph of humanity, as a force of nature, over the catastrophes, however dire, that beset it:

*The fifth spring of the war begins, / the girl weeps for her lover lost / the snow has already melted from the Warsaw streets. [...] A carousel tinkles on a little square, / someone shoots at someone on the street, / the wind blows up from the sandy, cloudy rivers. (1-3; 9-11)*

Yet although the collective—humanity—endures and is renewed in the same form as all previous generations, the individual—the girl's lover, the person being shot at in the unnaturally routine crime described in line 10—awakens the narrator to a sense of his own mortality, or, what is perhaps even worse, his own mutability:

I thought that my youth would last eternally, / that I would always be the same. / But all that remains now is terror at dawn / and I bend over myself

as over an empty flagstone, / vainly searching for something, that I already know. (4-8)

That shot in the neighborhood of the carousel (an image that will recur in “Campo di Fiori”), is a strong reminder of a familiar world knocked off kilter, a world made arbitrary; with relativity in place of external law; a world in which the narrator has become a *tabula rasa*, and must learn everything anew:

But what does it all matter to me. / I am a child, who can't tell a yellow dandelion from a star. / I have attained the wisdom that I waited on. / Who cares about the ages, who cares about history. I must / sculpt each new day, for each is an age to me. (12-16)

But he *will* learn it all anew, and his will to set it back together, piece by concrete piece, is underscored in the verb “sculpt,” 16, for he will reconstruct a real world from its real remnants. Most significantly, the one enduring, permanent point of reference, the one solid foundation on which to build upwards after the catastrophe, is God: “Lord, toss down to me a tiny feather of Thy mercy,” 17.

In Polish letters, the title *wieszcz*, which is only approximately translated by the English term “bard,” has a long and specific tradition. Unlike the English quasi-equivalent, which can have somewhat supercilious connotations (imagine it in the mouth of one of P.G. Wodehouse’s characters) and has, at best, a tinge of folklore to it (one pictures a wizened old Ossian-type fellow, whose particular charge is the safeguarding of ancient lore), the Polish term *wieszcz* possesses a sacerdotal quality. Its modern use arises from the nineteenth century, the Romantic period. From 1795 until 1918, Poland did not exist in a political, governmental sense. Divided between the neighboring empires of Russia, Prussia and Austria, the Poles had no ethnic, national figureheads to guide them; their borders and nationality were defined by their shared language. Thus, they naturally transferred their “patriotic” allegiance to prominent literary figures, who transcended the imposed, artificial internal boundaries separating partition from partition by virtue of their ability to speak to all regions of the Polish land. And along with speaking to them, *wieszcz*e such as Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki, and—to a lesser extent—Zygmunt Krasiński<sup>33</sup>—spoke for them. It was the poets, the artists, who kept the cause of Polish independence alive in the breasts of their countrymen, and before the powerful of the world in Western Europe, as the inexorable “Polish Question.” Thus, in nineteenth-century Poland, to modify Percy

Bysshe Shelley's dictum, the poets were the acknowledged legislators of the nation.

The Romantic idealism of the nineteenth century, coupled with the reality of a noble, ancient European nation existing only in its language, culture and history, while lacking a legal, statal presence, led logically to a decidedly mystical embellishment of Polish thought. The "death" of Poland led to fervent hopes for her "resurrection," and the political theology of Andrzej Towiański, and others, who developed the image of Poland as the "Christ of Europe." Her death into political servitude would lead to her resurrection into political independence, the "eternal life," which she would then bestow upon the other ensnared nations of the continent as much as Christ, through His Passion, re-opened the gates of Paradise to fallen man.

The Polish *wieszcz* is, then, in a sense substitute king, quasi-priest (mediating between God and the people) and prophet. It is this understanding of his calling which prompted Adam Mickiewicz to cry out, during an audience with Pope Pius VIII during the revolutions of 1830, "Know that the Holy Spirit is to be found beneath the shirts of the people of Paris!"<sup>34</sup>

The particular prophetic approach that surfaces, time and again, in Polish literature, is directly attributable to the cruel vicissitudes of Polish history. At times of moral crisis, when the barque of Polish independence either sank beneath the waves, or was just being swamped, and the critical moment when buoyancy would be overcome by gravity was expected at any minute, poets naturally, perhaps even unconsciously, stepped to the fore. I say "unconsciously," for it is at least debatable that Czesław Miłosz, for example, any more than Zbigniew Herbert, actively sought the prophet's mantle. Yet the prophetic paradigm suffuses the ink in the Polish inkwell, and is inevitably drawn into the pen each time the Polish poet sinks his or her nib therein.

Thus, while the ruminations on the "gift of inspiration," I found in the 1938 poem "Piosenka na jedną strunę" ["Song on One String"] might in most cases, seem artificial, a puffed-up posing, in the case of Czesław Miłosz they come across as natural, unaffected, despite the meter, which calls to mind Tommaso di Celano and Jacopone da Todi more than Jan Kochanowski or Adam Mickiewicz:

The last tram has screeched away / a cloud in the east greeted me, as if I  
had read about myself somewhere. // Already forgotten, past, / I return to  
the still misty bridge, / the cloud above me like a pierced dove. // And  
always, childish or gray, / I ask, is it that a righteous Somebody / wishes

me to be unhappy? // Is it so that I would write tomes / or rock the world  
asleep, silent / stifling other people with a smile? (10-24)

Before the cataclysm, Miłosz-Jonas could still run away from Nineveh;<sup>35</sup> could still, like Ezra Pound's Cino, shrug off the uncomfortable mantle of gravitas and turn instead to the "laughable/funny song," 30 of the swallows:

*In the green oaken glade / three kings slept / and a woodpecker knocked. //*  
*They awoke, sat up, / ate some golden apples / and the little cuckoo called.*  
(31-36)

After the war, In 1945, it was another matter altogether. In the poem "W Warszawie" ["In Warsaw"] he takes up this very question of prophetic responsibility: why is it, his narrator asks himself, that I can not do as I intended to do, that is, turn away from the cruel introspection that weighs so heavily upon the souls of those doomed to a bitter diet of ashes, consumed in the national refectory to the accompaniment of long readings from the Polish martyrography?

What are you doing there on the ruins / of St. John's Cathedral, poet, / on  
this warm, spring day? [...] You swore that you'd never be / a professional  
weeper. / You swore never to touch / the great wounds of your nation, / so  
as not to transform them into something holy, / a damned holiness, that  
should pursue / your descendants through age upon age. (1-3; 7-13)

The answer he provides is straightforward. The suffering he is surrounded with is like the coal placed on the prophet's lips by God; the tongue is loosed, and he is unable to restrain the flood of words, no matter what he would rather:

But that wail of Antigone's / as she searches for her brother / is truly  
something past all bearing. And the heart / is a stone, in which, like an  
insect / the dark love of this most unhappy of lands / is enclosed. (14-20)

The answer is developed in the next stanza of the poem, so powerful in its simple statements descriptive of the individual who, despite his assertions of his own right to happiness, finds that right impinged upon by the weightier demands of history, witness and responsibility:

I didn't want to love like this. / It wasn't my intention. / I didn't want to  
have such pity. / It wasn't my intention. / My pen is lighter / than a  
hummingbird's feather.<sup>36</sup> This burden / is beyond my strength. / How am I

to live in this country, / where the foot stumbles against the bones / of one's relatives unburied? / I hear their voices, I see their smiles. I cannot / refuse to write anything, for five hands / snatch at my pen / and force me to write their history / the history of thier life and death. / Is it for this I was created, / to become a professional weeper? / I want to describe the bright feasts, / the jolly glades, into which / Shakespeare led me. Grant / the poets a moment of happiness, / for your world is about to perish. (21-42)

But escape—even if it were possible—would be an inexcusably selfish act. Why is the narrator a poet? This is a question just as unanswerable as any other ontological query, such as why did he have to be born in Poland? Why, in the tragic twentieth century, rather than in the happy sixteenth? There is nothing to do with these facts but accept them, take stock of them, and move on. Like the continued existence of God, they too form a part of the foundations upon which he must begin his patient re-sculpting of the world. He can do nothing but be the mouthpiece of the tragically fallen men and women who also deserved more happiness than they were allotted, and on their behalf, on behalf of the eternal hierarchy of right and wrong, which must not be allowed to erode beneath the cutting sands of absurdity and relativism, see to it that the new world be raised on firm underpinnings:

It's madness to live without smiling / constantly repeating two words / facing you, the dead, / to you, whose lot / was supposed to be the happiness / of deeds of thought and sinew, / song, banquets. / Two rescued words: / Truth and justice. (43-50)

Madness? Was the pseudo-science of Hitler and his goons, which precipitated the ruination of the poet's world by making ideas such as "truth" and "justice" subservient to party interests, a saner system? Given the choice, should we not opt, rather, for the insanity of the Christian, Western vision of reality trampled underfoot by both brown and red totalitarianism?

Thus, despite the bitter complaints of the narrator in these concluding lines—he balks as does the elder, finally obedient son in Christ's parable<sup>37</sup>—he chooses responsibility. And, as the war was a caesura in Miłosz's philosophical thought, so afterwards it resulted in a higher sense of personal, human responsibility, which became a triumphant keynote of his postwar verse. It is here, perhaps, where Tomas Venclova is right in suggesting that "like few writers of the present day, Miłosz preserves a sense of the hierarchy of values."<sup>38</sup>

The caesura that was his wartime experience and the consequent sense of responsibility—a clearer expression of the envoi of the earlier “Wcielenie,” i.e. that Christ is made most present in this world through the witness of His disciples—is most evident in some of Miłosz’s most famous postwar poems. In “Biedny chrześcijanin patrzy na getto” [“A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto”], the first time in Miłosz’s oeuvre that his narrator directly identifies himself as a Christian, the speaker considers the rubble that remains after the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto (a fate shared later by the greater part of the city itself). Among the plaster dust, frayed cables and crushed brick are also to be found human remains:

*Bees build round the red liver, / ants build round the black bone.] (1-2)*

Man, his physical, material stuff, is shown here as a building material no better than cement, wood, or iron. If there is any gentleness to these lines, any hope latent in the sense of human material being “recycled” by patient, victorious nature, that is deafened by the horrid reminiscence of men treating other men as mere objects, the cruel reality of the inhuman and dehumanizing Nazi policies, which in a shameless manner first allowed for the question, which never should have been posed—What, after all, is the difference between flesh and wood? Carbon is carbon.<sup>39</sup>

Now there begins the tearing, the trampling of silk, / now their begins the smashing of glass, wood, copper, nickel, silver, / white plaster foam, tin, strings, trumpets, leaves, crystal balls—/ Puff! the phosphoric fire from yellow walls engulfs human and animal hair. // *Bees build around the honeycomb of lungs, / Ants build around the white bone, / Paper is torn apart, rubber, canvas, leather, flax, / fiber, fabrics, celluloid, hair, snakeskin, wires, / the roof falls into the flames, the inferno takes the walls and foundations. / There remains only the sandy, trampled earth, with one leafless tree. / Earth. (3-14)*

Then, in line fifteen, an individual life appears amid the destruction. A mole enters the picture, slowly, and carefully, boring his tunnel<sup>40</sup>:

Slowly, boring his tunnel, the guardian-mole moves forward / with the little red lantern attached to his brow. / He touches the bodies of the buried, counts them, penetrates further, / he distinguishes human ashes by their iridescent exhalations. / *The bees build round the red stains, / The ants build around the space left by my body. (15-21)*

The mole here is more than a simple, humble creature of the earth. Far from a personification of indifferent Nature, he not only recognizes the



distinction between human and inanimate rubble, the Polish line can be read to suggest that he is able to distinguish between individual humans “by the iridescent exhalation.” This is something that the people who precipitated the catastrophe—the Nazis—were unable, or unwilling, to do. And this, consequently, infuses both the mole, and the insects, with a gravity that puts men to shame. As for the narrator himself, arriving at the same fork in the road as the postwar absurdists, faced with the same incomprehensible fact of a cultured, Christian nation establishing an inhuman civilization that was the negation of their entire cultural and moral history, he does not choose the path that leads to nihilism. Rather, he follows the mole, the bees and the ants toward another fundamental—the miraculous, positive principle of life, that in turn implies a Life-Giver.

Yet the implications do not cease there. A personal Fount of Life, God, implies a moral order to which mankind is called, and according to which mankind—the narrator as well—will be judged. In the lines which follow, the *gravitas* of the mole arises to a position of moral superiority, from which vantage point mankind’s actions are examined:

I fear, I so fear the guardian-mole. / His eyelids swollen like those of a patriarch, / who has sat long in the glow of candles / poring over the great book of the species. // What shall I tell him, I, a Jew of the New Testament, / waiting for the return of Jesus for two thousand years? / My broken body will give me up to his examination / and he shall count me among the enablers of death: / the uncircumcised. (22-30)

The mole, in his physical similarity to a “patriarch,” takes the side of the murdered Jews. The narrator, a “Jew of the New Testament” (is he speaking here in his own name, or that of all Christians?) is to be tried for their murder. If he did not pull the trigger, if he did not switch on the gas, still, did he do anything to fend off the mortal danger facing his brothers? Or did he use Ismene’s rationale of powerlessness, and allow the evil to happen by doing nothing? It is this silent complicity that the narrator is most frightened of, and which he fears will group him among the “uncircumcised,” the murderers.<sup>41</sup>

Bodily imagery in this poem is striking. Just how are we to imagine the physical position of the narrator? Is he standing there upright, gazing at the ruined ghetto, as he implies in the title? Or is he somehow buried beneath the rubble himself, as lines 20-21 might be read (if the italicized first-person lines are his own, and not those of another speaker)? We note too the mention of his “broken body” in line 28, exposed to the examination of the mole, as a dead object. These lines are not italicized, and thus belong to the narrator. All of these seemingly contradictory

references to the narrator's physicality, including the reference to circumcision, create a sense of dislocation, which can only be resolved by referencing their common denominator: humanity. The narrator is Jew and German and Pole, circumcised and uncircumcised, because he is a human being. This is not to solve his moral dilemma; it does not allow for *apokatastasis*,<sup>42</sup> indeed, just the opposite. It confronts the narrator with his humanity and leaves him struggling in the same fear: there is your body, and here. There your flesh is buried, and here you stand in your flesh, on the spot where flesh of your flesh precipitated the catastrophe. With which brother do you align yourself? With Eteocles, or Polyneices? With Creon?

And so the "Jew of the New Testament" is waiting, faithfully, two thousand years for the Savior to return. Just like those whom Christ rejects in "Wcielenie." Not for their praying and believing and pleading—but because they do nothing more than that.

A no less famous poem dating from the war years, often commented upon and translated, is "Campo di Fiori," written somewhat earlier than "Biedny chrześcijanin patrzy na getto" (Easter, 1943). The form of the verse consists of a series of parallel constructions—temporal and analogical. In the first two stanzas, the narrator considers the Campo di Fiori, the somewhat ironically named "field of flowers," where people go about their business blissfully unaware of the judicial murder perpetrated there in 1600:

In Rome, on the Campo di Fiori / Baskets of olives and lemons, / the  
cobblestones splashed with wine / and fragments of flowers. / Rose-  
colored *frutti di mari* / are spilled on the tables by merchants, / armfuls of  
dark grapes / tumble onto the fuzz of peaches. // Here on this very piazza /  
Giordano Bruno was burned. / The hangman kindled the flames of the pyre  
/ amidst the circle of interested gapers. / The flames had hardly died down  
/ before the taverns were full again, / and the merchants were again bearing  
/ baskets of olives and lemons balanced on their heads. (1-16)

The next two stanzas present an analogical parallel—the reactions (or lack thereof) of the Warsaw population in 1943 to a contemporary state-sanctioned murder: the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto by the Germans in reprisal for the Ghetto Uprising:

I thought of the Campo di Fiori / in Warsaw near the carousel / on a warm  
spring evening / while the gay music played. / Salvos beyond the ghetto  
wall / deafened the happy melody / and steam floated high up / into the  
pleasant sky. // Sometimes a wind from the burning homes / carried near  
black kites. / Those riding on the carousel / caught the flakes on the  
breeze. / It sent the girls' skirts floating / that breeze from the burning

houses. / The gay crowds laughed / on that beautiful Warsaw Sunday. (17-32)

One expects the point of the poem to be that cruel indifference of the Ismenes of the world (not to use the term “Cains” of the world), who might not, as does Grete in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, deny her brother his humanity in order to clear her conscience of responsibility for his death, but in reply to the question “Am I my brother’s keeper?” respond, “Certainly, but only when it doesn’t put me at any immediate risk:”

Someone might arrive at this moral: / that the Varsavian or Roman people / do business, have fun, make love / passing by the stakes of martyrs. / Someone might arrive at another moral: / concerning the passing of all things human, / of forgetfulness, which grows / before the fires are quite burned down. (33-40)

Miłosz’s speaker does not deny the validity of that expected, and obvious, interpretation,<sup>43</sup> yet he goes further, cuts more deeply, by forcing our eyes away from the newly-oblivious crowd to the suffering individual on the scaffold:

I however, thought at the time / of the loneliness of the perishing. / Of the fact that, when Giordano / ascended the scaffold, / he found nothing, in any human tongue, / not a single word / with which to bid farewell to humanity, / that humanity that remained behind. (41-48)

Here he himself assumes the role of the mole that was to cause him so much anguish in the later verse. He takes his stand on the side of the condemned, not that of those who:

They were already rushing to toss off the wine, / hawk their white starfish, / they carried baskets of olives and lemons / chatting gaily. / And he was already far away from them, / as if whole centuries had passed, / and they waited but a moment, / for his departure aloft, in flame. (49-56)

It seems cheap bravery, taking the side, however empathetically, of the sixteenth-century victim; the fire that burnt him has long gone cold; the stake consumed with Bruno himself. What does the narrator risk in “setting himself alongside” the dead theologian? If we can imagine the same persona speaking in both poems, why did he not risk himself alongside those who *were* physically nearby, in Warsaw, in 1943? It is a question we should be ashamed to put, for we are in an exactly analogous position in regards to the situation of the composite narrator as he is, in

regard to that of Bruno. It is the ultimate, and most important, parallel in this poem of pairings. To play along with our “composite narrator” idea, it is just as easy for us to point our finger at his lack of engagement on the part of the Jews of Warsaw, 1943, as it was for him to do, in relation to the indifferent crowds in 1600 Rome. The shameful question we pose to him rebounds to us: what do we do, not say, not think, but *do* on behalf of our fellow humans in the much less drastic emergencies of our everyday life?

The narrator does not shirk responsibility. The poem ends with stanza eight:

And those, the dying, the lonely, / already forgotten by the world, / our language has become foreign to them, / like the language of a distant, old planet. / Until everything becomes legend, / and then, after many years, / on a new Campo di Fiori / a poet’s word sets off the rebellion. (57-64)

These last lines have traditionally been interpreted in the heroic-poetic vein of poet-revolutionaries that begins, again, with Adam Mickiewicz, and stretches through engaged poets like Stanisław Wyspiański to Miłosz, Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński, Władysław Broniewski, and others. Yet the heroic subtext, while undeniably there, is not the only layer of meaning present, and to focus on it unduly is to overlook the even more important layer of self-irony. For the “composite narrator” is accusing himself in these lines. When, exactly, did the analogy to Giordano Bruno occur to him? Just *after* the Ghetto massacre? Before it ended? If so, why did he not “set off a rebellion with his words?” Is he expecting *someone else* to raise his voice here? Perhaps the narrator is not to be taken as a poet himself, but just a run of the mill citizen looking for a poet-authority to properly formulate the imperative he himself feels, and energize the crowd to rebellion? Why is he waiting, like the Christians castigated in “Wcielenie” and “Biedny chrześcijanin patrzy na getto,” for Christ to come and take the matter into His hands, absolving them of the responsibility of positive action on behalf of others?<sup>44</sup>

Whatever the case, the narrator poses the irony-pregnant question because he wishes to underscore the necessary link between word and deed, philosophy and action. He does this by the emphasis he places on language in the concluding stanzas of the work. The thing that shocks him most about the Giordano Bruno affair, and its later reenactments, like the Ghetto holocaust, is the divide that lies between the “language” of the dying and the “language” of the living. During peacetime, during the calm days preceding the theologian’s arrest in Venice and sentencing in Rome, these two parallel groups of people, victims and witnesses, spoke the same evangelical language of brotherhood in God and fraternal love, respect for

human life and defense of the helpless, right and wrong, etc. Suddenly, when push came to shove, Bruno and the other victims were shocked at the indifference of those whom the bullet missed. Have we been reading the same books after all? Have we understood things in the same way? What happened to the covenant of love we invoked so often when it was convenient to do so, when it cost us nothing? There is no answer from those remaining behind. They turn away in awkward silence, refocusing on taverns and carousels, trying to get in out of the uncomfortable smoke of the conflagration. The narrator too sees his role, more than anything, as the marriage of lip with hand, word with action, ideal with reality, so that both portions of our existence, the temporal and the eternal, really speak the same language, and those who “fly off in flame” no longer do so as painfully confused as Bruno—if they must be suffered to fly off at all. Is that enough? Perhaps Sandauer is right: what else can he do?

The endurance of the poetic word, and the poet’s responsibility, and reward, are given a positive context in “Podróż” [“Journey”], a poem written in the midst of wartime Warsaw, and thus surprising in its optimism. It is almost as if the narrator, as poet, accepting his prophetic mantle, wished to speak the words his again leaderless people<sup>45</sup> needed to hear. He shows us a world where normalcy, even song and frivolous play, exist alongside ruins and fear:

Perhaps it was somewhere amidst the ruins, / where they play cards in  
burned gateways, / a gramophone plays—and small, childish ghosts, /  
shivering from fear, crawl through cellar-dens—/ from here, the road led to  
distant springs / in the evenings, when a humid mist fell upon the city...  
(23-28)

June is still June. As so often in his poetry, Miłosz describes a beautiful young woman. Here, the girl appears as the most positive guarantor of the fecund goodness of life, life to be experienced, loved, life which will be victorious:

June sparkles, June. Already windows are open. / My shadow glances into  
a window—the curtain is swimming the breeze / and a diagonal smear of  
sunlight rests upon the ground floor, / where a young beauty moves about,  
in light like muslin. // June sparkles, June. She tilts her face lightly, /  
pushes back her hair with her hand and says: “nice weather.” / Her neck  
shines like a carafe filled with rosy wine, / when she turns her cheek to the  
burning sun. / All the happiness of earth... that line of parted lips /—the  
interior of a conch lit by a deep fire—/ to the narrow knees, to the peaceful  
feet / one blow of form, a wide tallness! / Neither memory of crime can  
soil her,<sup>46</sup> / nor the night, which will not return, bursting with evil glows—/

she stands, hears the song of the world, trusts the charm of dawn, / the chirping of sparrows, the foaming fountains of chestnuts...// How we wanted to touch such lips unsoiled / with pain, just one time. And see the smile of goodness / and faith—that there is after all something that divides peoples / from the cruelties of nature, bloody and innocent. (41-60)

Do we meet her after the war, or while it is still going on? In a sense, we meet her out of time, for she is an ideal. She is presented as something of a goddess of both love and foison, Aphrodite and Demeter in one. As such, the narrator invokes her intercession before passing on:

Thou, whose smile is balanced lightly in the azure, / Thou, who dost fulfill joy in distant generations, / Smile for us as well, the faithful, though different.../ and thus did I greet her in the name of the dead. (61-64)

“Thus did I greet her in the name of the dead”—the narrator no longer recoils from the role of the spokesman; here, the complaints of Antigone do not taste as bitterly in the mouth as they do in the postwar poem discussed earlier, “W Warszawie.” The glory that can be found in the present, and which augurs good for the future, softens his distaste for the obligations placed upon him by the past, has him welcome them, rather, as those of a just reality, unjustly extinguished, which must not be left to fade entirely, but must rather be preserved in that future as well. Thus does he greet a kindred artist in his progress: an old sculptor, whom he encourages with words that can just as easily be applied to himself as artist:

Work on—for there has been too much silence. / Too many winters have laid their ice upon our graves, / too many oaks have been strengthened by new greenery / and our mouths taken from us. Too much silence. / Our frenzy was clothed in a mask of peace / tear away that peace—and show us, how we were, / how we died believing, and believed, dying. / ah, slice through the darkness with thunderbolts, save us from silence. (90-97)

The image of the sculptor and the monumental sculpture described in lines 75-76 (“Upon the cheeks of the titan,<sup>47</sup> [whose mouth was] open to scream / A butterfly alighted and spread wide its wings”) seems, anachronistically, to belong to the Socrealism period of the Stalinist 1950s. The image is, of course, indicative of the triumph of nature over Nazism, of God over Speer. But if we experience an odd dislocation in time, as above, it is due to the narrator’s consciously accepted prophetic mission. The sudden hierophany of the beautiful girl has transported him, in “dream,” to a vision of a peaceful, victorious Warsaw of the future:

I kept walking. And dreams of architecture grew before me, / marble steps crowded round me in a foaming wave, / I touched them, before I floated away on them. / (And there were mountains similar to Powiśle,<sup>48</sup> / but the scars of artillery shells were already grown over by the sod / and children were feeding squirrels there, on the lawns). (65-70)

It is a cornucopia of pleasure, an Arcadia that enraptures and enthuses him as much as it would any intended auditor of the poem.<sup>49</sup>

In the distance hummed the city. Meats were smoking on grills, / a thousand bowls were arriving on the groaning tables. / Sliced fruit was pulsing with cool juice, / baskets of ruddy loaves of bread were standing in pyramids, / and strong fragrances were beating through the violet spaces. / Alcohol! Cognac like autumn orchards, / gin fragrant with bitter berry extract / applejack, burgundy, meads, limoncelli, / Beers with bubbling yeasty froth. / And when the yellow sun strikes the galleries, / and bursts in splashes of red along the rows of glass panes / the shell of brightness tears through the mirrors like foam: / feasts, feasts aflame in Galilean Cana! (100-112)

Nowhere do we see a narrator of Miłosz more eager and willing in his role of *wieszcz* than in the final verse of the above-cited fragment. So unusual is the voice we hear in line 112, so similar to that of Cyprian Kamil Norwid,<sup>50</sup> that it is hard to read the line as anything other than a conscious self-inscription into the company of the great Romantic bards, as clear as Dante's acceptance as the "sixth" of the number of great classical poets in Canto IV of the *Inferno*.

In just the same—admittedly honest and factual way—the narrator acknowledges the perdurance of his poetic utterances:

Someone's lips whispered a poem. I knew the words. / Oh, God, after all, I myself wrote that verse. / Perhaps words are small and matter little, / But I remember the table, the rain, and that day, / and that victory of mine—then—over despair... // Thus was it given. And now new winds blow across the sky, / young springs brighten with azure for lovers, / flowers explode from the soil, poetries are born, / pairs stroll the Vistulan groves to listen to the nightingales, / and some sort of Apollonian feasts are taking place here / and here are dances, and Negro films. / Yes. And everything is here—to be. To be with them together / Alive, on the living earth among the living, / in gigantic living waters to bathe one's dead face, / to repeat myself, once existing, in the eternal voice / To be... Above the city, the bells are pealing right now. (117-132)

This acknowledgement—as brash as it may seem—is no less a reminder of poetic responsibility and a humble self-warning. One’s words will live on, especially in the case of poets. The words composed “so long ago” by the narrator and overheard by him on someone else’s lips in the imagined future are words of triumph—words through which he wins out over despair. It is not too much of a stretch to see these words as an auto-reminder of prophetic responsibility—to build, not destroy; to affirm life, not despair.

Finally, back in the realia of wartime Warsaw—or in the immediate aftermath of the conflict, rather?—the narrator comes across a second female character:

Now begins the time / when the plans of new temples lay on the tables, / and the world trembles yet, raised up by wisdom / between what it will become and what it was yesterday. / Her face, with an ancient sorrow shining through its furrows, / so that it seems like a burning symbol on copper, / gazes straight ahead—while she, above the city, above the field / legislates the code of ploughs, and boundaries for the sword. / Sorrowful mother, tried by the death of her sons, / executing her rule over her multiplying tribe, / gazes into the night, where the home fires of people sparkle / and where the stars shine over her head: “What is human history? / I don’t know. But one thing has been given us—/ to desire, to do, and to pass on—and beyond this is the night.” (144-157)

She stands in counterpoise to the beautiful “goddess of love and foison,” this Mother of Sorrows, who might just as easily be understood as a Polish woman stoically bewailing her fallen sons as the Mother of God herself—more than likely, the ambiguity is intentional.<sup>51</sup> And although one might be tempted to see these two figures—the beautiful girl and the sorrowing mother—in opposition to one another, they are, rather, to be seen as different manifestations of the same eternal Woman: Goethe’s principle of the salvific *Ewigweibliche*. Both say the same thing to us: “Desire, do, and depart, when your role is finished, but depart not before desiring and doing all that was in your power to do.” And although the sorrowing mother’s last words—“Beyond this is night”—seem nihilistic, they are not necessarily so. They might just as well, and I think, more justly, be interpreted to mean: “Beyond this, it is in God’s hands. Don’t seek to know what is beyond your comprehension: the proper order of your desires and the significance of your doings, for there is Someone else Whose job is to judge that.”

This consciously-accepted role of the *wieszcz* is not entirely the product of the poet’s wartime experiences. It has been latent in Miłosz’s



verse from the earliest days—witness the beautiful “Modlitwa wigilijna” [“Christmas Eve Prayer”] composed in 1938, and addressed to just such a sorrowing woman:

Mary pure, bless her / who does not believe in mercy. May thy bright weary hand / Smooth away all her sadness. Beneath thy hand, may she sob more lightly. // [...] // Lead near the parade of white mountains, / for them to shine in her window. May the magi from Chaldea and Ur / cure her of the memories of evil years. / May deceased poets touch their strings, and softly sing a carol for the lonely woman. (1-5; 11-16)

If anything, it is a testament to a strength of character, that this stubborn faith won out, despite the despair-filled years of the forties and the dire trials it was put to. One might say that the war tempered the steel and confirmed the youthful trends of the thought expressed by Miłosz’s narrators. Unafraid to question, pushed on, indeed, to the brink of despair like Count Henryk in Zygmunt Krasiński’s *Nieboska komedia* [*Undivine Comedy*], still they dig their heels firmly into the shelf just short of the abyss, and will not be toppled over. Miłosz’s narrators stare suffering squarely in the face, and handle despair, turning it over in their hands like evidence at a crime scene. But their response to the troubles of life is: pity, mercy, and, in the end, faith, trust.

It will not always be thus.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Václav Burian, “Wdzięczność i wstyd” [“Gratitude and Shame”], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 35/2877 (August 29, 2004), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Dziennik polski*, Kraków, August 17, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> We omit the name of the retired professor, who would probably not like to be remembered for his role in the affair. The offensive texts appeared in the August 16 and 19, 2004 editions of *Nasz Dziennik*. The professor emeritus, who based his argument on citations from Miłosz’s poetry, torn from their context, did not express the views of the great majority of Poles, nor of his mother institution, the venerable Jagiellonian University of Kraków. The faculty and students of the UJ published long letters of objection to the professor’s words on p. 3 of the *Tygodnik powszechny* 36/2878 (September 5, 2004). On August 20, 2004, in an official communiqué, the Polish Council for Media Ethics in Warsaw charged *Nasz Dziennik* with a cavalier disregard for the accepted ethical standards of journalism.

<sup>4</sup> Not to say that the question wasn’t posed... or responded to in a manner that borders on the sacrilegious. For during the controversy, the poet’s confessor felt obliged to comment upon the religious aspect of Miłosz’s last moments, assuring everyone—in a way that shaves close to breaking the seal of the confessional—

that he died a faithful child of mother Church. See Józefa Hannelowa, “Smutek i wstyd” [“Sadness and Shame”], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 35/2877 (August 29, 2004), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> For the full text, see “Telegram Jana Pawła II z okazji pogrzebu Czesława Miłosza” [“John Paul II’s Telegram /dated Castel Gondolfo, August 25, 2004 and addressed to Franciszek Cardinal Macharski of Kraków/ on the Occasion of Czesław Miłosz’s Funeral”], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 36/2878 (September 5, 2004), p. 5. The Pope went on to cite his rather ambiguous response to the poet: Nad jego trumną pragnę przytoczyć również moją odpowiedź: „Pisze Pan, że przedmiotem Jego troski było «nieodbieganie od katolickiej ortodoksji» w Pańskiej twórczości. Jestem przekonany, że takie nastawienie Poety jest decydujące. W tym sensie cieszę się, że mogę potwierdzić Pańskie słowa o «dążeniu do wspólnego nam celu»“ [Over his coffin I wish to add my answer to him: “You write that your concern was to ‘not depart from Catholic orthodoxy’ in your writings. I am certain that such an attitude on the part of the Poet is decisive. In this sense, I am happy to be able to confirm your words of ‘striving towards a common goal.’”]

<sup>6</sup> Czesław Miłosz, *Ziemia Ulro* [*The Land of Ulro*] (Paris: Instytut literacki, 1980), p. 199. For the context of this sentence, Miłosz is speaking of the then-current enthusiasm for the “evolutionary-scientific” theories of Teilhard de Chardin, which, in its happy conviction of an optimistically unfolding march of humanity towards the “Christ-point,” brushes aside questions of evil. Miłosz says: “Which doesn’t mean that I wish to present myself here as an adherent of Manicheism in its forms known to us from history. I simply think that a certain Manichean component is necessary to us, and difficult to avoid.” Certainly, this context is important! Yet one wonders if there is no other way of speaking to the unavoidable questions of the existence of evil in a world created good, than the dualistic thought that Miłosz seems to cotton to. Why is *any* element of a system rejected by the Church, in its “familiar” or “unorthodox” forms, “necessary” to the believer for the resolution of that question?

<sup>7</sup> Czesław Miłosz, *Visions from San Francisco Bay*, p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> Czesław Miłosz, *Visions from San Francisco Bay*, p. 175.

<sup>9</sup> Czesław Miłosz, *Miłosz’s ABC*, p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> Cynthia L. Haven, ed. Czesław Miłosz. *Conversations* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), p. 126.

<sup>11</sup> Archbishop Józef Życiński, „Lód i płomień: Homilia na Mszy pogrzebowej” [“Ice and Flame: Homily for the Funeral Mass”], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 36/2878 (September 5, 2004), p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Życiński, „Lód i płomień.” W całej twórczości Miłosza pulsuje augustyński niepokój serca szukającego Boga.

<sup>13</sup> Życiński, citing Miłosz in „Lód i płomień.” *Mistrz pokonanej rozpacz*.

<sup>14</sup> When religion is broached in them, it is often discussed in the pedestrian manner of many young people, who make an absolute of this life, who idealize youth, and display a quasi-Nietzschean contempt of the “four last things,” which seem so far away. Consider an exemplary stanza from the poem “Na śmierć młodego mężczyzny” (“On the Death of a Young Man”), from Miłosz’s debut collection:

“The immense power of death, its charm and terror / can only be understood by those who are beautiful. / O, with what love of life, and cursing of God / did the poet Sergei Yesenin place the barrel of the pistol to his lips!” (13-16)

<sup>15</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all textual references (line numbers, page numbers) are to the recently published authoritative edition: Czesław Miłosz, *Wiersze wszystkie* [*Complete Poems*] (Kraków: Znak, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 18:3. “Amen I say to you, unless you be converted, and become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of Heaven.”

<sup>17</sup> Preisner, *Kritika totalitarismu* [*Critique of Totalitarianism*] (Rome: Křesťanská akademie, 1970), p. 49.

<sup>18</sup> Preisner, *Kultura bez konce* [*Culture without End*] (Brno: Atlantis, 1997), p. 63.

<sup>19</sup> Again, see Preisner in his “trialogue” *On the Life and Death of Conservatism*: “the words of the Lord are confirmed: ‘It’s not for you to know the day or the hour—that only knows the Father.’ From this we see that speculation on the future ends merely in the construction of myths.” Rio Preisner, *O životě a smrti konzervatismu* (Olomouc: Votobia, 1991), p. 47.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Czerniawski’s discussion of Miłosz in *Firing the Canon. Essays Mainly on Poetry* (London: Salt Publishing, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> See the early poems “Ojciec w bibliotece” [“Father, in the Library”], “Zaklęcie ojca” [“My Father’s Spell”], and “Ojciec objaśnia” [“My Father Explains”], for examples of this.

<sup>22</sup> Ewa Sławek, “Espace perdu et mémoire retrouvée dans la poésie de Czesław Miłosz,” in Hana Jechová and Hélène Włodarczyk, *Les effets de l’émigration et l’exil dans les cultures tchèque et polonaise* (Paris: Presses de l’université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1987), pp. 107-119, p. 111.

<sup>23</sup> All the same, in connection with this poem Sławek references here Jacques Derrida’s *Glas II*, in which we find a description of woman that uncovers striking similarities with gnostic thought: “Divine law is the law of the woman. It is a hidden law, it does not offer itself in that overture of manifestation which man produces. It is nocturnal and more natural than the law of universality, just as the family is more natural than the city... Natural, divine, nocturnal feminine, familial, such is the prescriptive system [*le système prédicatif*], the law of singularity.” Sławek, p. 114.

<sup>24</sup> Those unfamiliar with the verses of Hector de Saint-Denys Garneau are referred to the poem “Les Ormes,” to be discussed in the final chapter of this book, where we seek to contextualize Miłosz among the work of other Catholic moderns. As Garneau’s poetic career progressed, he moved further and further from the positive position enunciated in “Les Ormes” toward the desperate struggle in poems like “Le diable, pour ma damnation...”

<sup>25</sup> In the early verses, “no faith” often means “no room made for faith” by the dominant political culture, which in “catastrophist” poems such as “Opowieść” (“A Tale”) from the *Poem on Frozen Time* is shown exploiting the technology lauded by the Futurists for military aims: “Prayer, an unknown vapor, smoked ever more frequently / from the corners of the laboratory hidden in the symmetry of the human body.” It can be pushed aside, but it “will out.” The same sort of distrust of

the modern world, from a social angle, can be seen in the penultimate lines of "Przeciwko nim" ("Against Them"): "The heavens, as silent as a thousand years ago / shower on the face searchlights."

<sup>26</sup> See Czesław Miłosz, *Dolina Issy* [*The Issa Valley*], pp. 9-10.

<sup>27</sup> In the context of this poem, Miłosz's line can also be read as a belittling of the necessity of sacerdotal intermediaries between the believer and his God. Mickiewicz's character goes a bit further in his raving "Great Improvisation," and claims to be God's equal.

<sup>28</sup> In this context, it is interesting to consider "Ludzie na ziemi" ["People on Earth"], an uncollected poem written three years earlier, in 1933. Much less straightforward than "Wcielenie," it is a poem from the catastrophic period in Miłosz's writings which seems close in spirit to the expressionism of Georg Trakl. The images build up a sense of toil and looming, martial defeat, crowned with a misty eschatological hope that seems shot through with despair, unwillingness to assume responsibility, and procrastination. The poem ends with the odd lines "And in torment they whispered: man will cleanse us. / In the next world we will exist, eternal." (15-16)

<sup>29</sup> The text can be read as signifying their honest labor, as harvesters and miners. Still, considering the context and what is to follow, it is difficult to imagine what other "example" of Christ the poet can be referring to here.

<sup>30</sup> "Play" seems to be used here in a musical sense.

<sup>31</sup> The Polish word krzyż means, firstly, "cross," it is also used commonly in reference to one's back.

<sup>32</sup> Especially considering the penultimate stanza, repressed in earlier versions of the poem printed in the socialist Polish People's Republic.

<sup>33</sup> To the poets might be added the painter Jan Matejko and the novelist Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, both of whom popularized the national traditions in their works.

<sup>34</sup> To which the Holy Father responded, "Remember, son, where you are."

<sup>35</sup> It is interesting in this regard that the Jonas theme is also hinted at in the concluding lines (13-16) of "Powrót" ["Return"], written about the same time, referenced above.

<sup>36</sup> There is a strong affinity to the Rococo in much of Miłosz's works, a gay, erotic frivolity to which his narrators would like to devote themselves, yet which the world, history, and their values (there is no better word) will let them indulge in but rarely. One of the best early examples of this is the poem "Walc" ["Waltz"], dated Warsaw, 1942. There, a beauty at a turn of the century ball, amid all the light and wine and flirtations, has a vision of her unborn son bloodying the snow after a cruel, lost battle sometime in the future. And although the poet who "points this out" to her returns her, with a calming smile, to the warm, carefree ballroom, the image remains; what has said cannot be unsaid; the uninvited and unwelcome guest spoken of by both Poe and Hardy has taken his seat at the shining table.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Matthew 21: 28-31. *But what think you? A certain man had two sons; and coming to the first, he said: Son, go work today in my vineyard. And he answering, said: I will not. But afterwards, being moved with repentance, he went. And*

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coming to the other, he said in like manner. And he answering, said: I go, Sir; and he went not. Which of the two did the father's will? They say to him: The first. Jesus saith to them: Amen I say to you, that the publicans and the harlots shall go into the kingdom of God before you.

<sup>38</sup> Tomas Venclova, "Poetry as Atonement," *The Polish Review* XXXI:4 (1986), pp. 265-271, p. 270.

<sup>39</sup> The lines can be read in this menacing fashion as well. On the one hand, the bees and ants are "recycling" the human material; on the other, they "build around it," i.e. ignore it.

<sup>40</sup> We take the mole and the insects literally. Artur Sandauer sees in these words metaphors for the "looters plundering the Jewish quarter [of Warsaw, after the stifling of the Ghetto Uprising];" at times, he says, "man differs only slightly from insects." Sandauer, who was no great fan of Miłosz's otherwise, felt that this poem, and "Campo di Fiori," "saved the honor or Polish literature." See his *O sytuacji pisarza polskiego pochodzenia żydowskiego w XX wieku* [*On the Situation of the Polish Writer of Jewish Descent in the XXth Century*], collected in his *Pisma zebrane* [*Collected Works*] (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1985), Vol. 3, pp. 445-517, pp. 480-481.

<sup>41</sup> Circumcision should not be used here in an oversimplified manner, i.e. "circumcised" = Jew, "uncircumcised" = Christian. Rather, it should be read in the light of Romans 2:29, in which Paul reminds Christians of their duties being "circumcised" of heart.

<sup>42</sup> *Apokatastasis* is the heretical doctrine proposed by the early Christian thinker Origenes. It posits the anti-evangelical thesis of a finite hell, the cyclical cleansing of all creation, which would lead to the final redemption of the souls in hell, and the devil himself. We point this out here, because the term will be reintroduced in some of his Miłosz's later writings in a way that obscures or ignores its heretical import.

<sup>43</sup> Judith A. Dompkowski's brilliant interpretation of this poem is worth quoting in relation to the gaping crowds here: "But the sins noted in this selection receive an actual widespread punishment: the poem itself is a prelude to more death, in fulfillment of the catastrophic visions. Some of the Polish people who watched the 'pyres,' who knew of the Nazi ovens, were also destroyed. In an ironic twist, the summer uprising of 1944 against the Germans caused extensive death to the Poles who were 'laughing as wind from the burning / would drift dark kites along.' Miłosz calls it 'a peculiar postscript' to the poem." See her "down a spiral staircase, ever ending." *Motion as Design in the Writing of Czesław Miłosz* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), pp. 39-40.

<sup>44</sup> Sandauer is more understanding in his interpretation of these lines: "What can one do here? Stir the crowd to help the perishing? No, literature is not intended as an agitation to action; its proper office is the communication of a remembrance of what has taken place." See his *O sytuacji pisarza polskiego pochodzenia żydowskiego w XX wieku* p. 480.

<sup>45</sup> This must be taken with a grain of salt, in context. The Polish nation was in a different situation during World War II than it was during the partitions of the

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XIXth century. Despite the Nazi-Soviet occupation, Poland had a government-in-exile, functioning out of London and acknowledged by most sovereign nations. The Poles of the XIXth century had committees and politicians abroad, but none acknowledged by foreign governments, and none acknowledged by the Polish people themselves to the same extent that they looked to artists like Adam Mickiewicz.

<sup>46</sup> The Polish can be also be translated “neither her memory of crime can soil it”—“it” most likely being that beautiful form the narrator talks about, as “form” and the pronoun “it” are both of the feminine gender in Polish.

<sup>47</sup> An earlier published version of the poem has *tyrana*, “of the tyrant” here, instead of *tytana* “of the titan.”

<sup>48</sup> A neighborhood near central Warsaw.

<sup>49</sup> “Brama Poranku” [“The Gate of Dawn”], an uncollected, undated poem from the period 1937-1944, contains a similarly enthusiastic, positive apocalypse.

<sup>50</sup> The Polish ear hears almost against its will: *Hostię—przez blade widzę zboże... / Emanuel już mieszka / Na Taborze!* [“The Host—I see through the pale wheat... / Emmanuel already inhabits / Mount Tabor!”] from Norwid’s “Fortepian Szopena” [“Chopin’s Grand Piano”] IV:13-15.

<sup>51</sup> She is Mother of God, so revered in Poland; she is any human mother; she is the “Polish Mother” [*Matka polka*] of Mickiewicz’s verse, accepting her sacrifices and suffering on behalf of the country, and finally, with the palpable allusions to her somehow presiding over the rebuilding described in these lines, she is something of a Polish Dido —Mater Polonia personified. This brief silhouette is one of Miłosz’s most intriguing poetic creations.



## CHAPTER TWO

### THE ATLANTIC MIŁOSZ: 1946-1960

What we call the “Atlantic period” in the poetic career of Czesław Miłosz comprises some fifteen years, from the end of the war in 1945 until his (seemingly) final break with Europe and the East Coast of the United States, for his long tenure on the faculty of the University of California, Berkeley. As far as his poetry is concerned, the period is marked by two major collections of verse. The first of these, *Światło dzienne* [*The Light of Day*], published in 1953, contains poems dated as early as 1945 (Kraków) and as late as 1953 (Bonn). The other is *Traktat poetycki* [*A Poetic Treatise*], printed in Paris in 1957; this is a long, traditional narrative poem in five parts dealing in the main with the development of the modern Polish poetic idiom.

In terms of Miłosz’s biography, this portion of his life falls into uneven halves. Beginning in 1946, Miłosz was in the service of the communist-led Polish People’s Republic. He became a cultural attaché, first at the Polish consulate in New York City, and later at the embassy in Washington, where, as Andrzej Franaszek puts it,

he was to prepare analyses of the political situation in the States for his superiors, organize lectures and readings, of his own poetry, as well as that of others.<sup>1</sup>

He also played a key role in arranging the foundation of a Polish Chair at Columbia University, which was to be held by his friend and mentor Manfred Kridl. This one act was to leave a bad taste, deservedly or undeservedly, in the mouths of some Poles in America, since the chair was to be supported by funds provided by a communist government.<sup>2</sup>

Politically, Miłosz was between a rock and a hard place. Disliked by anti-communist Poles living abroad due to his “collaboration” with the Soviet-imposed régime, he was not fully trusted by the communist authorities in Poland either. Summoned back to Warsaw from Washington, Miłosz dutifully went, although haunted by forebodings of



his passport being confiscated, and his chances of traveling abroad or leading a normal life in newly totalitarian Poland curtailed or rendered impossible.

His fears were not unfounded. With his wife and two young sons—one an infant, born in 1951—in Washington, and he in Poland, he frantically strove for, and at last obtained, permission to travel to France. Then, after arrival, he promptly defected to the West.

One might expect a similar “before and after” breakdown to Miłosz’s verse in this period, i.e. the poems of Miłosz acquiescent to the régime while he was employed by it, and the poems of Miłosz the dissident, coming after his escape. Yet this is not the case. One would be hard put to find any politically “engaged” verses in Miłosz’s oeuvre. On the contrary, his poetry, from 1945 on, shows a sober assessment of the new, threatening reality of the communist world, and his consistent rejection of the same, on behalf of human dignity.<sup>3</sup>

One of the more interesting poems as a “setting of place” or landscape after the battle, to display Miłosz’s sense of the new moral space created by the end of the war, and the imposition of communist totalitarianism and perceived American expansionism, is “Dwaj w Rzymie” [“Two in Rome”], dated New York, 1946. It is one of several short “closet dramas” written by Miłosz in this period, a loose dramatic style perhaps indicative of the struggle going on in his own breast between his desire to serve an “independent” Poland, and his distaste for the new régime, which barely rose to a semblance of autonomy. This struggle was complicated all the more by his ambivalence, not to say distaste, of the other option, represented by the ascendancy of America, and the consequent universalizing of what some in Europe saw as its cheaper, commercial-based culture.

The poem begins with something of a prologue. The place is set in a restrained, almost scientific manner, in which pure geography takes the place of historical significance, and small life-forms crowd man off the stage:

Darkness begins above Castel Sant’Angelo / in an immobile point of the globe, where the Tiber unbraids time. / The earth, an ember burning down, touched by the wind, breathes in the ashes. / One can make out the rustle of a lizard, / the clatter of a mouse’s feet, and the sobbing of the world. (1-5)

Again, a new beginning, a tabula rasa. Even Rome itself has lost its significance in the darkness, to become little more than a point on the globe bisected by the Tiber. All is in a state of anticipation. When the first human voice is heard, it is just as non-committal as the surroundings in which it reverberates:

As long as the human body is shot through with hot streams / and through love of other bodies calls trembling forms to life, / one might live in delight or despair. / But when the abstract desert of the world shows itself / and the hour of farewell arrives, / the scent of leaves, the shape of clouds, mean nothing at all. (6-11)

It is difficult to get a proper grip on these ambiguous lines, which could express both hope and despair. Any positive sentiment, either way, is washed out by a temporal generality. Are we still in that era, when the human body is nourished by the good warm blood, which swells at times to the procreation of other people, or has this time passed; are we now faced with the “abstract desert of the world” where the realities that activate our senses are devoid of all meaning? Again, as in an expressionist poem by Georg Trakl, it is not so much the precise meaning of the poetic images in themselves which is important, but rather the mood created by their interplay. And the mood established in these opening lines of “Dwaj w Rzymie” is that of uncertainty; an expectation of something that could be annihilation just as easily as rebirth.

Just who the eponymous “two” in Rome are is quite as difficult to determine. Of the characters mentioned by name, directly addressed as if taking an active role in the situation described, one is a Cardinal, the other, a “witness” of some sort. Perhaps this last is the narrator/poet himself? But as the poem continues, we hear a familiar timbre:

The purple of my cloak will not tint desiccated hands. / The pulse of my time beats slowly. / The living and the dead speak the same language now and for all endless days. // I have heard a crying out for mercy / but wasn't able to have the mercy that was required: / from the child's cradle to the grave there is nothing but a five-minute, little life. // Yet why should I have mercy on those who perish, / bearing their little life in my palm with tender concern. / In the great dusk, bent over the first cause, / I stifled the sorrow within me, doused my delight. // In the immobile point of the globe, where nothing changes / another mercy exists, of the human species / a mercy begun there, where the powers of memory end: / In the great, shining silence of the immobile point. (12-27)

The parody of prayer contained in lines 13-14 (i.e. “now and forever, amen”) seem to characterize the speaker as a cleric. But as the stanzas progress, the lines about improbable mercy and why he should carry a life around in the palm of his “desiccated” hands sound as if they were pronounced by the lips of that equivocal Christ of “Wcielenie.” If before the war, in Warsaw, He would have little truck with the pleaders-but-not-doers, what is He to feel of the Europeans He has watched throughout six

years of merciless self-slaughter? Line 23, “I stifled the sorrow inside me, doused my delight,” has an ominous ring to it, as if this were a Second Coming companion-piece to the earlier Incarnation poem, and this time, the era of mercy is at an end. Christ now comes as Judge.

Still, as we read on, His reference to that “other” sort of mercy, human mercy, promising, or at least making possible, a new beginning, once forgetfulness of past injustices has freed men to look forward, returns us to the mood of uncertainty, possibility: a world destroyed, awaiting a rebuilding on the cleansed squares where its futile monuments once stood. However, this is as close to optimism as the poet allows us to get. Perhaps there will be a cleansing and a rebuilding some time in the future; at the moment, we have nothing but the ruins.

Between stanzas of direct speech there occur stanzas in italic script. They are purely descriptive, and read like didascalia. In the following stanzas, we are presented with the image of a dancer:

*Look at the dancing girl. / Ta da da ta da. / Her fearful foot emerges from the mirrors of night as if from water / and curling down her toes she takes her first step. // Her other knee moves close, slowly / and her dark sex, a mark distinguishing dead humans / from nonliving matter, through its ancient possibility of generation / is covered by strings of beads / which tremble. // She tosses her arms aloft, and her breasts / with those dark signs at which we once suckled / cuddled against our dead mothers / anticipate her flight / towards an unseen star. // Unshaven and sunken faces gaze at her, / immobile, million upon million, / chewing over a crust of bread found in a barrack's corner. / Her fluttering flight continues, until suddenly, with a cry, / tossing wide her arms, she falls down headfirst / in a soft explosion like the explosion of an old photo flash / at the stony rim of a broken fountain. (66-86)*

We recall how central an importance the figure of woman is to the poetry of Czesław Miłosz; one need only compare this broken, degraded example of femininity to previous ones, such as that “goddess of love and foison,” and the sorrowing mother lately discussed, to gauge just how black the narrator sees the immediate future. He presents just as disheartening an image of the poet in lines just previous to these:

The poet of this epoch does not uncover his face / for that would reveal his features grimacing in terror. / His teeth would be bared sarcastically in the light of a weak moon. / The meanderings of words do not serve him as they served / poets, who sought ecstasy in words. / He thinks coldly, and calculates the open spaces. [...] Between opposite and opposite / he makes a new choice / and what is chosen is never what it was to be. / A

thunderbolt in hand, and in the valleys the racket of the forest. / A man falling into the cemetery near the cliffs. / And nothing remains. And it's always too little. (43-48; 54-59)

Now, towards the end of the poem, the narrator, whom we may perhaps associate, if not entirely identify, with this poet of the new era, identifies himself as a “witness” who acknowledges the equivocal nature of his views. Yet he ends with that stubborn hope that we remember from Miłosz’s early verses. Even should the Vatican itself fall to pieces, he will work on to keep alive the ideal of a golden age, transferring it “from heart to heart”:

Yes, I am a witness. But not reconciled. / No one alive will tear peaceful agreement from my lips. He who is faithful does not confirm. If your Vatican should fall to pieces, / I will go on, to bear on the winds the *aurea aetas* from heart to heart. (78-83)

Pretty, no? Sure it is, and uplifting. But what a difficult task it will be! For no sooner are the words out of his mouth than the golden ideal, the promising future, is downed out by the memories of the recent past, or visions of the present day:

*When the stump<sup>4</sup> thumps along. / When the parade of torn army coats, / of eye-whites immobile as eyes of marble. / When women tie up their sagging stockings with twine / and bundles are toted along behind heads thrust forward. / When old men weep over their last love / to a wooden doll or a packet of letters.* (84-90)

Does he mean to say that he will bend himself to the task of “transmission” and uplifting in spite of such oppressive circumstances? Perhaps, although those *kiedys*, these “whens,” might be just as well translated as sarcastic “even though”s. And here again we are at the limit of optimism; this former possibility is as far as we can go. The fact that such circumstances are due to be around in his near future emphasizes once again the fragile balance upon which this new reality is poised, and the difficulties facing those who would build a golden, human new world upon the ruins.

This task is made all the more challenging by the work already being done in Miłosz’s part of the world by forces that have nothing to do with either the Catholic, or the Classical West, to which the narrator of “Dwaj w Rzymie” refers and with which he seems to identify. The order that Stalin and Bierut and Gottwald and their minions are constructing in Eastern and Central Europe at this time has nothing ambiguous about it;

and in his postwar verse, Czesław Miłosz's poetic personae attack it front on.

Take, for example, verse 3 from the angrily sarcastic cycle "Dziecię Europy" ["Child of Europe"], dated New York, 1946:

There can be no mention of the triumph of force / because this is the era in which justice is triumphant. // Don't say a word about force, so that you will not be accused / of confessing fallen, bankrupt doctrines in secret. // Whoever is in power owes that to the logic of history. / Honor the logic of history as is only meet. // Let the lips declaring the hypothesis know nothing / of the hands which simultaneously falsify the experiment. // Let your hands, falsifying the experiment, know nothing / of your lips, which are simultaneously declaring the hypothesis. // Know how to foresee the inferno with infallible precision. / After which, you will set fire to the house and that which was to happen, will be fulfilled.

With these lines, so similar in tone to the Decalogue, the narrator laconically uncovers the cynicism of the new system imposed upon his country, in which every aspect of philosophy—moral, ethical, personal and political—is based upon implacable force. It is senseless to complain about the "triumph of force," since, once that triumphant force has imposed upon all thought the *a priori* doctrine of the triumph of Communism as a natural historical necessity, it is justice that has triumphed; thence, logically, if this is the epoch in which justice (and only justice) triumphs—whatever triumphs is just! As Rio Preisner explains it in *Česká existence* [*Czech Being*]:

The thesis, that "philosophers must constantly bear in mind that in their work they are never for a moment to think of themselves as private persons," is a thought that in no time matures into the paradoxical statement that "in the interest of socialism, philosophy must constrain the thinker to an irrespectively binding, true footing in reality, while conversely binding him, during his private scholarly research interests, to openly set Lenin's question: "Cui prodest?" What an interesting advancement of Pilate's ancient question, "What is the truth?" Well, if it doesn't serve the interest of the Party, it must be ruthlessly stamped out along with the person of the researcher who sets it forth. For "The philosopher must continually cast the same rigorous eye upon himself and his social context as he does upon the subject of his studies." Absolute truth is thus negated, dialectically, by the absolute interest of the working class (that is, the Party). And this will, finally, result in the synthesis of the only allowable "Party truth."<sup>5</sup>

This cynical straitjacket, in which might is right because might is necessarily mighty, nor would it be so were it not “right” (the head begins to spin, doesn’t it?) leads to the suppression of all thought not in accord with its dictates (lines 3-4). For logically, if the “truth” is before you, any rejection of that truth in favor of something else is necessarily backwards, wrong, and even criminal. But what is truth in this system? How can truth be arrived at in a system of schizophrenic science (lines 7-10), in which results are dictated before experiments are conducted, and any experiment, no matter how conclusive and verified, which leads to a result other than that previously established, demanded, by the “laws of historical necessity,” is to be discarded as somehow systemically flawed?

This is the “logic of truth” which, as it is described it in lines 5-6, is no handmaid to man’s reason, made to serve him in his ways and days, but a shibboleth, a tyrant god who must be appeased “as is only meet.”

Whence this “god” arises is plain to any person with a solid, objective grasp of the history that the totalitarians would mold and disfigure to please themselves. In *Traktat poetycki* [*A Treatise on Poetry*, 1957], this issue is addressed in Part III, entitled “Duch dziejów” [“The Spirit of History”].<sup>6</sup>

Where the wind wafts the smoke from the crematorium / and in the villages, the churchbell chimes for the Angelus / there walks about the Spirit of History, whistling. / He likes these regions washed over by the flood. / Formless ever since, and ever since, ready. / The skirt that flashes on the hurdle cheers him, / the same in Poland, in India, in Arabia. // [...] Now the poet has seen and recognized him, / a worse god, to whom are subject / time and the destinies of kingdoms of one day. / His face is huge, like ten moons. / Round his neck hangs a chain of still dripping heads. / Whoever does not acknowledge him, is touched by his wand, / at which he begins to babble, and loses his reason. / Whoever bows before him, will only be his slave. / His new lord will treat him with contempt. (30-36; 46-54)

Social justice? The classless society? No, all that the dawn of the socialist era brought to the denizens of Poland, and postwar Eastern Europe as a whole, was a new ruling class, no less arbitrary and cruel than that which it “liberated” them from; indeed far more so, in its negation of human worth, its denial of human dignity,<sup>7</sup> its exploitation of the human person as any other lifeless material to be consumed only to ensure its own continued existence.

The totalitarian system, especially that of the postwar years, is a Moloch, demanding human sacrifice; it is an evil Saturn, devouring its own children. This point is brought strongly to the fore in the poem “Na

śmierć Tadeusza Borowskiego” [“On the Death of Tadeusz Borowski”]. Borowski, a talented young poet before the war, known to many following the war for his powerfully dispassionate accounts of cruel everyday life in Auschwitz, became a literary spokesman for the communist régime in Poland during the darkest days of Stalinism. Like Miłosz, who defected to the West when, as he puts it, he could “swallow no more goldfish,” Borowski also came to the conclusion that life in the new circumstances was impossible. His way out was suicide—leaving behind a wife and a newborn daughter. But what did his suicide change, what effect did it have on the system? None whatsoever:

So he opened the gas and turned his face / to the wall, passing away into dark ages. / And the oceans continued to churn their snowy froth, // the cloud, beneath the moon, spread wide the whiteness of its feathers. / The smooth wall of the East loomed on in silence / and in Ciemnogród there burst forth laughter. (22-27)

Thus is Borowski named, over-harshly perhaps, a “traitor” in line 1 of this poem. He served a bad cause; his death, greeted with laughter by those he rejected (“Ciemnogród”<sup>8</sup>—the “reactionary” Poles who rejected the historical necessity of the new system) and impassively by the East, where now dwells the Spirit of History, who will interpret that death in whatever cynical manner he sees fit—even unto the remaking of this drastic rejection as a martyrdom on his behalf. No, Miłosz’s narrator intimates, the poet has other obligations than such selfish escapes. But more of that later.

There have been several theories as to why Borowski committed suicide, including the rather incredible theory that he was unable to find another exit out of the moral dilemma of that most bourgeois of domestic dramas—an adulterous relationship.<sup>9</sup> The prevailing sentiment, however, is that expressed by Miłosz in his *Zniewolony umysł* [*The Captive Mind*]. There, in his portrait of “Beta,” he suggests that Borowski’s tragedy was that of the impossible despair felt by a person who has honestly given himself over to the communist promise, when he finds it to be, in practice, a cynical lie:

Those who observed Beta in the last few years of his fevered activity were of the opinion that there arose an ever greater conflict between his public statements and the abilities of his sharp intellect; he behaved too nervously not to assume that he himself took note of that conflict.<sup>10</sup>

Whatever the case may be as far as Borowski is concerned, Miłosz’s narrators understand the conflict between wishing to believe in the

promises of the new system—from whatever motivation—and the imperative of the honest mind that recognizes the emptiness of these same promises, a situation which will lead, in the best case scenario (but for how long?) to the imperative of ironic hypocrisy. See, for example, the description of the citizen of the totalitarian state from the opening lines of “Portret z połowy XX wieku” [“Portrait from the Mid-Twentieth Century”] (Kraków, 1946):

Hidden behind the fraternal smile / Contemptuous of the newsprint readers,  
the victims of political dialectics, / pronouncing the word “democracy”  
with a sly wink, / loathing the physiological delights of humanity, / full of  
memories of those who ate, drank and made love and whose throats were  
slit a moment later, / praising dances and public garden parties as a  
pressure release for public anger, / crying “culture and art!” and thinking of  
circus games, / bored to death, / mumbling in sleep, or under narcosis:  
“God, God.” (1-9)

He could like to see himself as a victim of circumstances:

He compares himself to a Roman, in whom the cult of Mithras mixes with  
the cult of Jesus. / The old faiths have not been quite extinguished in him.  
Sometimes he thinks he’s possessed by demons. / He thunders against the  
past, afraid all the same that, when his bolts have completely destroyed it,  
he’ll have nowhere to rest his head. / He is passionate about cardgames  
and chess, so as not to betray his own secrets. // He has lain his hand on the  
scriptures of Marx, but at home he reads the Gospel. / He looks with  
sarcasm on the procession coming out of the ruined church. / For a  
backdrop, he has the ruins of the city, the color of horse flesh. / In his  
fingers he holds a souvenir of a “fascist” fallen in the uprising. (10-17)

Yet the fact of his subconscious devotion to so non-materialistic *numina* as feed his superstition, and his barely concealed pull towards the forbidden past—the Church, the amputated history of the non-communist opposition during the last war—leads the narrator to castigate him for his cowardice. His subservience towards the régime, although he knows better (Zbigniew Herbert’s anti-hero Pan Cogito begins here) marks him as intellectually dishonest, and his preference to melt into the gray acquiescent mass of everyday slaves, rather than to take the drastic step of self-liberation chosen by Borowski (Stanisław Barańczak’s anti-hero N.N., from *Stuczne oddychanie* [*Artificial Respiration*], also begins here), marks him as a coward.

However, the unavoidable fact remains that such an easy escape as turning away from the dilemma, refusing to get involved, using “historical



necessity” as a rationalization for not making moral decisions, does not exist in any society, including post-war, communist-ruled Poland. As Miłosz’s poetic persona notes in the poem written a year before this last and entitled “Do Polityka” [“To a Politician”] (although its challenge can be tossed at the feet of the gray man as well):

Stop! Tremble in the bowels of your heart! Don’t wash your hands! /  
 Don’t pass the judgment into the hands of unfulfilled history! / Yours are  
 the scales and yours the sword. / You, above human care, hatred and hope /  
 rescue or condemn / the republic.<sup>11</sup> (7-12)

“Who are you, man—a criminal or a hero?” the narrator asks in line 1 of this poem. The choice really does rest in the hands of the individual. And whereas in the case of the powerful, at whom this poem is in the first place directed, the choices he makes potentially effect millions —

You are good and in the family circle / Have been known to stroke the  
 shine of children’s heads. / But if millions of other families—curse you? /  
 Woe! what shall remain of your “good” days? / What shall remain of your  
 fiery, stirring speeches? / The darkness approaches. // Buzzing cities and  
 fields, mines, ships / all on the palm of your hand, your human, all too  
 human, hand. (13-20)

— the moral of the poem is applicable to all human individuals. Like it or not, a hierarchy of right and wrong is the foundation upon which all society is based, against which all of our actions must be measured, will be measured:

Look. Your life line is going to go this way. / Thrice blessed / thrice  
 accursed / lord of goodness / or lord of evil. (21-25)

Such is the main thrust of all of Miłosz’s immediately postwar verse— a reminder to all that governments may come and go, tyrannies can replace monarchies, but the imperative of moral choice is never suspended, let alone abolished.

The will to do away with an absolute hierarchy of good and bad—logically enough—is the province of those who wish to have a clear field for actions that, according to traditional canons of morality, would be considered wrong; or those who, having played that game in the past, would now like to call the hierarchy into question, as if it were a system ill-suited to judge their acts. A good example of the former are the communists, who would jettison “bourgeois” morality as a hindrance to the construction of their new society, while the latter are easiest

exemplified by the Nazis, who would absolve themselves of guilt after the failure of their experiment. We find just such an attitude in the poem “Siegfried i Erika” [“Siegfried and Erika”] (Washington, 1949).

The poem is set on the lips of a former German pilot, most likely one of those who sowed destruction among the columns of refugees choking the roads of Poland during the first weeks of September 1939, from the howling fury of his Stuka. Looking back after defeat, he loads the deck by expressing a general philosophical credo of relativism:

I know only one thing: order is ephemeral. / chaos surrounds our intentions  
with mist, / patiently awaiting its hour to strike. (7-10)

Shortly after this, he comes to his personal narrative. Despite the re-shaping of man that he allowed himself to be subjected to during the Hitlerite years, despite his new found faith in the a-moral, constantly mutating imperative of life and behavior, his conscience, true as a compass, will not let him rest:

Yes, I killed. Is that bad, Erika? / The road ran up to me with the whistling  
of my rudders, / and it was chaos there, understand? Columns / of wagons,  
bundles, filth, scorching hot, crawling, terror, the relaxed / will unable to  
sustain intention. / Fatal sparks which ran into that crowd / from beneath  
my wings, how pure they were! / I hovered above the world, the realized /  
form of humanity free of complaint. / I had control over body and machine,  
/ I reached out to grasp the future of the human race, / when the boundaries  
of chaos withdraw / and there shall be but one unsullied line, / a structure  
bright as a steel mast. (22-35)

There is nothing in his agonizing memory—agonizing, because he is searching for a rationalization that will not be found—that will justify his actions save that found in lines 29-31: I was right because I had the might. Might is right.

This is the new morality, which, in a strange psychological turn, in the eyes of Siegfried, makes victors of the defeated Germans. For they, even though defeated by the reactionary Western democracies, have discerned something that escapes the Allies, still devoted to the moribund liberalism that the Germans cast off with the rise of Hitler. And this is why he ends his poem unrepentantly, finding his rationalization in the higher knowledge of relativism’s triumph, and waiting eagerly for the day when the new mighty ones, the Americans, fall off their high horse and into the abyss of the new truth. There, Siegfried and his Germans await them:

So they accuse us? Let them but find out / how one takes one's first step in ignorance. / The banner flutters and love of the group / stifles the petty unmanly doubt / which ticks on, a liberal superstition. / Let those victors only find out how quickly / one moves on from the first acquiescence / to total faith, to the final threshold. / And if the day dawns, in which they shall cry: / "Us? We are innocent! We didn't know!" / Then the burden of guilt will be thrown from our shoulders / and our German nation will reach out again / for the portion of praise owed us. Believe me, sister. (36-48)

The very idea of victory through failure, which Siegfried enunciates in his pitiful little poem, is absurd,<sup>12</sup> and undercuts the reliability and trustworthiness of the former German officer. The strident tones with which Siegfried brings his hopefully prophetic missive to an end, while serving, indeed, as a warning to the West, lest She not learn from history (a prominent theme of Milosz's Atlantic period), still sounds like the stereotypical Prussian Junker of popular art, and makes Siegfried a laughable character, a painted devil.

By their fruits ye shall know them. The only acts that Siegfried enunciates in his poem are the gullible acquiescence to Nazi indoctrination, the rejection of "superstitious" liberalism, and the genocide he carried out on the people "beneath" him, literally and figuratively, which resulted directly from the foregoing.

"Siegfried i Erika" is an anti-confessional verse. The "sinner," tortured by his unsleeping conscience, reveals his sins, yet is not penitent, as he feels no sorrow for them. Indeed, he is proud of them, and seeks to justify them. But although he is given a hearing, he will receive no absolution. Might must never be allowed to become right, and this monitory verse is intended to portray just what happens to people when they cease acknowledging the absolute moral hierarchy. Siegfried not only murdered others; here he appears in the guise of the child that crawls into the maw of Father Saturn, of his own volition.

"The most intricate complex of opinions changes / when you shift the perspective, from which you behold it," 11-12 we read in the "Traktat moralny" ["Moral Treatise"] (Washington, 1947). This is not so much a statement of *audiatur et altera pars* as a warning, perhaps especially understandable to those of us living under the threat of genetic engineering, that the slightest variation introduced into a naturally functioning system can set off a catastrophe for the entire organism. Just that "stifling of petty, unmanly doubt," "Siegfried i Erika," 39], for the "greater good" leads to the horrors of Nazi internal oppression of the German people, the repression and holocaust of the Jews, the most destructive war that Europe has ever seen, and the subsequent enslavement

of half the continent to the totalitarian spawn of this sort of thinking, which lasted over sixty years in the last century. Miłosz's narrator will not allow individual men and women the "out" of shirking responsibility for their actions, and the fate of those they will necessarily affect like ripples on a pond, by a helpless shrug towards historical necessity, the "chaos" of the times, the aforementioned "Spirit of History." As his great poetic persona Antigone puts it in the mini closet-drama "Antygona" (Washington, 1949):<sup>13</sup>

To accept everything, just as one accepts / summer after spring, winter after fall, / to gaze impassively upon human affairs / in the same way as one looks at the successions of thoughtless nature? / As long as I live, I will cry out: no. / Do you hear, Ismene? I will cry out: no. (1-6)

This thought is developed more fully and with even more conviction in the ironic "Traktat moralny" referenced above:

You're not all that deprived of free will, / and even if you were just like a field stone, / the avalanche will change its course / in relation to the sort of stones it courses over. / And, as another person was wont to say,<sup>14</sup> / you can have an influence on the avalanche's course, so do it. / Assuage its wildness, its cruelty. / You'll need manly courage to do it. / And even though the modern state / rails against Samaritan service, / we've seen too much crime lately / for us to renounce goodness / and, saying "Blood is cheap today —" / Sit down calmly to breakfast, / or seeing even the necessity of nonsense / accept it as our daily bread. (129-144)

In lines which recall both the infamous concerts of classical music in Auschwitz, and Miłosz's own Politician, who is a doting grandfather to his own brood, smoothing the hair of the little ones with one hand, while signing the execution orders for millions with the other, the poet argues that evil cannot be compartmentalized away from good. The two phenomena, culture and "wet work," cannot be separated from each other and judged separately; they are divided, if at all, by a permeable membrane through which the blood unjustly spilled will seep, disfiguring, tainting all else:

For schizophrenia—splitting in two / the being, into flower and roots, / is the idea, that my acts / *are done by someone else, not me.* / To feel it a small matter to wring someone's neck / and then to read the *Divine Comedy* / or applaud an old quartet / or discuss the avant-garde. / On a smaller scale, it's ubiquitous, / someone says "evil is faceless, / and we are used like instruments." / He's right. And well on his way to destruction. (259-270)

He's "right," because evil does need our instrumental cooperation in order to exist. But that doesn't matter. For what these "schizophrenic" apostles of universal acquittal overlook—perhaps dishonestly—is that we are not hammers and wrenches, not "tools" devoid of will. Before evil instrumentalizes us, we must first agree to our exploitation. The speaker introduced by the narrator at this point is not "carried along" to his destruction, he "hastens" toward it—a verb which can only indicate volition.

The one poem that, perhaps more than any other, sums up most fully and succinctly the poetic mission of the Atlantic Miłosz is "Który skrzywdziłeś" ["You who have caused harm"], written in Washington in 1950. The first stanza presents the new post-war man of power, who, having freed himself of the imperative of moral behavior, does whatever he wishes to do, for his desires are circumscribed by nothing save his ability to fulfill them:

You, who wronged the simple man / breaking out into laughter above his  
wrong, / with a crowd of jesters round about you / to fully mix up right and  
wrong (1-4)

But this might of his is only potential, and is predicated upon the acquiescence of those subject to him. These are his "enablers," to use the fashionable term, for whom the narrator feels as much contempt as he does for the tyrant himself. They are the "crowd of jesters, clowns" that he castigates in lines 3-4; they are the frightened masses who mirror the tyrant in their amoral behavior, save that they are motivated by fear and a desire for self-preservation:

Even though everyone should bow before you / taking you as the epitome  
of virtue and wisdom, / striking gold medals in your honor, / happy for  
living through one more day (5-8)

Yet neither of these groups—nor the tyrants nor the tyrannized—can wish the absolute out of being. Its existence is the foundation of all meaningful human existence, and there will always be those to point it out:

[Be not secure. The poet remembers. / You can kill him—another will be  
born. / Your actions and conversations will be written down. // Better for  
you would be a winter dawn / with a rope, and a branch bent by a burden.  
(9-13)

At first, as we shall see, Miłosz's narrators will embrace the role of poet-prophet, perhaps because, forced into exile,<sup>15</sup> it will be the only thing

that he himself might lay claim to. And embrace it they will, with a vengeance. This is particularly clear in Miłosz's choice of verse-form for "Który skrzywdziłeś." It is, for all intents and purposes, a Petrarchan sonnet. By choosing this most traditional and venerated of poetic forms, Miłosz underscores the age-old pedigree of the poet, a pedigree that reaches far beyond that of the parvenus who now happen to wield sway over his compatriots, and the established nobility of the calling, with which the empty titles of freshly-baked officialdom, with all the "medals" they think up, cannot compete.

Finally, the clearly and plainly stated case that men can be killed, but ideas can't, is the culminating point in his argument of the real powers of the poet, the word, truth, over arbitrary might and cruelty. It in turn is emphasized by the fact of the sonnet being incomplete. It is only thirteen lines long, but the fourteenth, unwritten line, hangs over the tyrant's head like the sword of Damocles, a not so subtle reminder of the consequences of his actions, the fact that the "book" has not been closed on him—his present and future acts of tyranny are yet to be written down, eternized to his shame.

Yet Miłosz's narrator is no gentle prophet of the people. His moralism, at this point, is Christian in its very essence. As all men are equal in the eyes of God, so does each man share the same responsibility before the absolute imperative of moral behavior. He castigates tyrants, but he holds the common man up to the same standards. In "Naród" ["Nation"] (Kraków, 1945), a tight verse in which the narrator lists the characteristics of the Polish people, he declares a grudging admiration for the romantic heroism of the Poles at desperate moments in their history (such as the Warsaw Uprising):

The best of its sons will remain unknown. / They appear only once, to die  
on the barricades. (9-10)

Yet he spares not his sarcasm in their regard when crises pass. He finds them politically incompetent:

It gives rule over into the hands of people with the eyes of gold hawkers, /  
allows the rise of people who have the conscience of whorehouse  
managers. (7-8)

This is perhaps a harsh assessment of a nation bled dry by war, who had little, if any, input in the shape of the postwar government imposed upon them (although the speaker might perhaps be referring in a general sense to other failures in Polish government, from Poniatowski and

Targowica in the eighteenth century, to the prewar Sanacja régime), and fulminates against their straw-fired ardor, their inability to carry through a great action from beginning to end; to continue slogging away after the first blush of enthusiasm has passed:

The bitter tears of this people choke the song before it reaches its half, /  
and when the song is silent, they start telling jokes. (11-12)

Generalizations and stereotypes? Sure. But so is that of the Polish martial spirit, the devil-may-care bravado that took Somosierra and Monte Cassino. If you want to accept the positive stereotypes, how can you reject the negative ones, simply because they are unflattering? The problem with stereotypes is not the fact of their existence. They are a type of intellectual shorthand that everyone employs. The object for the stereotyped is so to act in daily life, as to accentuate the positives and build upon the good generalizations, while avoiding actions leading to hurtful characterizations, such as the withering words in “Do Jonathana Swifta” [“To Jonathan Swift”] (Washington, 1947):

I also came to know the tribe of Yahoo / who delight in their own  
excrement / Living in slavish terror, / a cursed race of informers. (21-24)

As we have mentioned, it is during the Atlantic period of Czesław Miłosz’s poetic career that we first find his narrators embracing, fully and enthusiastically, the self-definition “poet-prophet.” The hesitation to do so that we saw in the earlier verses—the Jonas complex of a man called to prophecy, yet unwilling to prophesy, eager, rather, to escape the vocation—is gone, and, although as he notes in “Poeta” [“The Poet”] (Paris, 1951), he is doomed to misunderstanding:

He will tell those, who count the faithful, / That he served well his calling.  
/ They will laugh at him, and hear nothing. / Having a good time, they’ll  
ask “why?” // Later, besieged, he’ll understand, / when he’s surrounded on  
all sides, / that there’s no defense on such a day / for no one will dare look  
him in the eye. (1-8)

he is never more certain of the real powers that his vocation bestows upon him:

And his tongue a double-edged flame / which deals invisible death / to his  
very last breath / sharp-toothed will be his farewell satire. (9-12)

He will be ignored by the people to whom he would speak, at their own peril:

“You will live free of suffering. / We will guarantee you readers and fame. / May your poetry, instead of waging wars, / teach people by entertaining them.” // And so shall it be. Gray ashes / will cover the pages of his writing. / Although nightmares will torment them, / no one will admit it out loud. // And you, man, don’t be so glad, / that drums beat out the poet’s death / your grandchildren will recall it with tears / for he was more necessary than you imagine. (21-32)

He takes upon himself both the prophetic office, teaching his nation, and that of their spokesman. He is, as he describes the poet in “Do Tadeusza Różewicza, poetry” [“To Tadeusz Różewicz, Poet”] (Washington, 1948), somehow both of the nation and outside it; able to see it objectively, and express with intimate knowledge its dramas.

His house is in a pine needle, in a deer’s belling / in the explosion of a star and upon a human palm. / No clock measures his song. Its echo / like the sea within an ancient conch / will never grow silent. He endures. And powerful / is his whisper supporting people. / Happy the nation that has a poet / and in its troubles does not walk in silence. (21-28)

It almost seems as if the isolation to which Miłosz was sentenced, both by the communist régime he turned his back upon, and the Polish émigré communities who looked at him distrustfully in the early years of his banishment, played a none too small motivating role in his seeming acceptance of the title “poet.”<sup>16</sup> Miłosz, because of who he was before, during, and after the war, was too well-known a public figure to disappear into the comfortable anonymity of exile as countless other Poles, chased abroad by the winds of war, were able to. He was constantly the object of definition by others. For the government he at first served, and then renounced, he was a traitor, a thankless enemy of the people. For many in the Polish diaspora, he was to remain one of “them,” that is, not one of “us,” for he had served in the foreign service of the communist régime, and it was he, after all, who helped organize the communist-funded Chair of Polish Literature at Columbia.

This last-mentioned fact held him at odds, for the longest time, with the Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences of America. P.I.A.S.A is a scholarly organization based in New York City, founded by Bronisław Malinowski, Oskar Halecki, and other exiles in 1942 in order to carry on the work of the Polska Akademia Umiejętności [Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences] of which they were members, but which was to be outlawed



for a half-century of foreign oppression, first by the Nazis, and later by the Soviets. Miłosz was continually refused admission to its ranks, until Kazimierz Wierzyński, a poet living at that time on Long Island, threatened the Board of Directors with his own resignation from membership, unless Miłosz were elected to the Institute.<sup>17</sup>

So, with all of these labels gratuitously bestowed upon him from left and right, it is not too much to suggest that his narrators' acceptance of the bardic mantle was also, in part, an assertion of the poet's own right to define himself. Of course, it is also the most proper definition. Before his assumption of teaching duties at Berkeley, his writing was the only occupation he possessed. Nor was he unaware of the real dangers that his vocation imposed upon him. In "Faust Warszawski" ["Warsaw Faust"] he speaks of the precarious position that his outspoken criticism of the Polish government puts him in, especially during the time when the poem was written—1952, the height of Stalinism/Bierutism—and where it was written—Paris, thus not at all out of the reach of the communist special forces who might have an interest in silencing him:

Fear, lest their arms reach us. / Yes, and it's true that I am being hunted by  
a pack / of those dealing in good names, hangmen, / murderers *per*  
*procuram*.<sup>18</sup> But that's how it should be. / Whoever wrote in Polish  
anything more / than tender odes, threatening to no one:/ was his reward  
anything but hatred? (20-26)

Yet this is the path he has chosen. And, as he puts it in "Trzy chóry z nie napisanego dramatu 'Hieroszima'" ["Three Choruses from an Unwritten Drama *Hiroshima*"] (Paris, 1950), he will never cease speaking on behalf of man—man *qua* man, whatever state he creates, whatever system he lives under, whatever he chooses to believe—man, eternally fragile and threatened, whose human dignity must constantly be defended:

[Above the stars of the heavens, the living stars of eyes / are more beautiful  
to me. The grainy roughness of the palm, / the brittle shape of the neck,  
well-turned knees / are more worthy of praise than trees in bloom. // How  
many times, in the crowded great cities / have I wandered, called forth by  
the warm power of blood, the desire / to collect and lock up the destinies of  
all people, / in myself, for all times. I wanted to be / man and woman,  
child and old man, at one and the same time. / I wished, by the cry of my  
voice, to add power and volume to the voice of my brothers and sisters, / to  
collect every smile and every silence / and enter into the flaming center  
which gives humanity life. (II: 5-16)

The great ally of the poet is truth, deeper and more enduring than any system created by men—especially such as are sustained by brute force (for these, as we have seen, will always seek to deny truth, or, failing that, control its interpretation for its own purposes). Thus the imperative of history as objective witness to reality is the poet's *métier*; thus its role as most effective weapon in his arsenal in the defense of man. As we see in "Central Park" (Washington, 1948, a poem addressed to Juliusz Kroński):

And to us, Juliusz, what sort of power has been given / as we foresaw the destiny / of our native Europe, which leads / beneath the armored feet of foreign powers? // Hardly had we finished mourning in the secret chambers of our hearts / that mother of arts and mother of sciences / than with a new faith we set in the balance / her ancient wisdom, and her bloody cobblestones. // To look peacefully upon that, which is force, / We know, that whoever wishes to rule the world, passes away, / and we do not believe that one must always live / with a knife, or an automatic pistol, in hand. // The ingenious industry of weapons is transformed into tragedy, / the winds in their rushing tear the banner in tatters, / but the name of the inheritress of the Greek name, / Fame, will endure, as long as humanity endures. // And the age of darkness will pass away like winter / as the tree has strong juices beneath its bark, / the smile of Sophists, as in Papal Rome, / will slap the pen out of the hands of the inquisitors. // Just as already once from Constantinople / Books were imported into northern countries, / the voice of our wise men, on fields grown wild, / will become the fountain of creative might. // This, then, Juliusz, the honor bestowed upon us: / to call to life new forms sculpted in gold, / and although the time of further transformation is not yet near, / to mix the martial beverages for the future. (45-72)

In "Narodziny" ["Birth"], written at the same time, his narrator does battle with the *tabula rasa* version of ontology, which would play into the hands of those to whose best advantage it would be to deny real people a verifiable past, underscoring man as a historical animal, a creature conditioned by history since his very birth:

Wherever he sets foot, everywhere / endures impressed upon the sand / a footprint, with a broad big toe / calling him, to measure against it his childish foot / emerging from the virgin forests. // Wherever he goes, there will he find / a smooth polish / on the faces of all things of earth / the effect of countless warm, human hands. / It will never abandon him, / but will always remain with him, / a presence as near as his breath, / his one and only treasure. (35-48)

Each person is born with historical pre-conditioning: a native tongue, an individual history provided by his family traditions, and national and ethnic identities bestowed upon him by the state in which he is born and the broader culture in which he is raised. His discovery of these ancient, yet familiar, inheritances does not only guarantee him a promising basis from which to begin conscious life, it is the best guarantor of individual safety—a grounding in reality (thus his “only wealth, only treasure”)—who I am, whence I come, what is expected of me, and what I may expect of others.

For Miłosz as he appears as the author of this poem—as for other Christian writers and philosophers (we may again mention Rio Preisner as an example) history cannot be separated from the real individuals who create it. The individual human being is at his most vulnerable when he has been deprived of his grounding in reality—past (historical) and present. To speak of “man” in a theoretical, abstract manner is to invite catastrophe. This is underscored most beautifully and effectively by Miłosz’s *Antigone*, when stating her case against her sister Ismene, who would pass by the inconvenient truth of her brother’s fate at the hands of an impersonal system built on theory:

Your hope, and that of those like you, is unnecessary to me, / for I have seen the remains of Polyneices / found between the rocks / there, at the base of the ruined cathedral, / his skull, as small as if a child’s skull, / with a tuft of light colored hair. A handful of bones / wrapped in a corruption of dark canvas / and the corpsy smell. This is our brother, / whose heart beat like ours, / who experienced joy and sang songs / and knew the fear of death, for in him their called / those same voices, which call in us. (54-65)

It is no coincidence that *Antigone* ends her complaint with an appeal to history:

Not only words, Ismene, not only. / Kreon will not build his state / on our graves. His order / he will not establish by the power of the sword. / The sway of the dead is wide, great. No one is safe / from it. Even should he surround himself / with a crowd of spies, and a million guards, / they will reach him. They await their hour. / They are ironic, the move forward with laughter / around the insane man, who does not believe in them. / But when he will draw up his accounts / suddenly, an error will appear in those accounts. / A small error, but when multiplied, / It suffices! And thus the mistake grows into frenzy, / the flame of crime burns villages and cities. / Blood! Blood! He wishes, with red ink / to cross out the error. But it’s too late. It’s all over. / Unfortunate Kreon plans to rule / as if we were a barbarian nation. / As if every stone here did not remember / the tears of despair and the tears of hope.] (88-108)

Our European civilization is based on thousands of years of tradition recognizing the real existence of real men and women. Not every person, not every governmental system, has lived up to the responsibilities imposed by this recognition *in re* inviolable human dignity, but each time such as system has been established, it has been fought against and eventually overcome. The same must be true in the case of “Kreon,” else Thebes will not progress, as his henchmen insist, but rather regress to a barbarism which sees man as exploitable matter, and nothing more—a view which negates reality, and, as such, is doomed to failure.

It is worthwhile at this juncture to recall the words of the aforementioned Růžka Preisner, Czech poet and philosopher, and Miłosz’s peer both in poetic vocation and American exile, cited above in reference to becoming “as little children” in regard to our approach to the world. The great value of the Christian foundation of Western ethics is the insistence upon tangible, historical existence and truth; its acceptance and enshrinement of these, and its consequent ennoblement of material nature. In this, it differs from both gnostic and eastern spiritual traditions which—witness Bl. Mother Theresa of Calcutta’s experiences with Hindu indifference to suffering, and those of St. Augustine with the Manichean elect—can be cruel in the very virtue of their exclusive concern for spirit over matter. On the other hand, the Christian tradition differs from atheistic “scientific” materialism in that it does not deny the spiritual realm, the primacy of the eternal over the temporal (which at the same time does not deny the intimate alliance of the eternal and the temporal, indeed the dependence of eternity upon temporality),<sup>19</sup> and thus underscores the significance of each individual human life, effectively preserving humanity from exploitation as mere “human resources.” This thought is behind the 1949 poem “Myśl o Azji” [“Thinking of Asia”], in which we are presented with the prototypical family of husband, young wife, and child, living under the despotism of circular time so characteristic of Eastern thought:

[...] Above them / writhe the arms of the gods and demons / of the air; the  
demons of the four elements / turn away their malicious faces. I hear the  
sound / of the interiors of antediluvian cliffs, the sound of a soap bubble, /  
the sound of the vanity of human efforts, an echo / without a cause, a laugh  
/ laughed by the void. (4-11)

Miłosz is not the first to uncover the causal connection between Eastern metaphysics and nihilism. It was not he, but the Buddha and those who came before him in the Hindu tradition, who posited the complete negation of the individual personality, even in the best of cases, when the

“cycle of becoming” is broken and the adept, now free of re-births, enters Nirvana like a drop of water disappearing in the ocean.

The Western, Christian thinker cannot help but see in circular time, “the eternal return of the same,” no progressive system at all, but a dead carousel, a truly vicious circle, and the life and death of the human person held captive in such a system as hopeless, meaningless:

And the vulture wheels his circles in the scorching cloudless heat / and the sound of the antediluvian cliffs mocks / man, his gods and demons. (16-18)

Of course, Eastern metaphysics is of no great interest to the Czesław Miłosz of the Atlantic period, and under “Asian” we are welcome to see an allegory of another Eastern tyranny: Soviet materialism. But that is not all. The nihilism born of such thought has arisen in the West as well: Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, all three of these, basically non-Christian, thinkers have acted as foreign bodies in the linear, meaningful time of Western thought, and they are to be rejected along with any system that leads to the triumph of the void. Certainly, that is difficult to do in the generations immediately following World War II, which—as the Absurdists rightly pointed out, while still arriving, in the end, at the wrong conclusions—was a great theatre of Western civilization turning in upon itself and revealing serious contradictions, not to say bankruptcy. For it was a time, as the narrator puts it in “Trzy chóry z nie napisanego dramatu ‘Hiroshima,’”

When the fruit of the apple tree afforded no sweetness to the lips, / when hearts beat an irregular time, when man / knew that he is not, what he ought to be. (I: 2-4)

And even in Paris, in 1952, in “Notatnik: Europa” [“Notebook: Europe”], the narrator acknowledges the fact that all is not well with our culture:

The heart of man is undermined. / The time given him to live in, and the other time, / are in his consciousness like two lines, / rather than like one, in harmony. (15-18)<sup>20</sup>

He too feels the pull towards despair; it will return to him in even stronger paroxysms during his California exile. Yet the lines with which “Myśl o Azji” end are full of that determined, heroic will not to despair, which can only be nourished by a culture that promotes the sanctity of the individual life, and its significance:

I think of things which give us strength / for the battle with the empty knowledge of the vanity of time, / of the glowing hot wire in the heart, of the decision / which none can evade, from which none can hide. / I think of all the men and women / who overcome the laughter of the primordial cliffs within themselves. (19-24)

Thus—how similar to Preisner—will Miłosz’s narrator remind Europe in his *Traktat poetycki* not to value theory over practice, not to cook the books and start, wrong way round, from desired result, violently skewing experiment so that it agrees with the outcome it would otherwise disavow. As he puts it in the sarcastic, anti-Hegelian prayer in Part III:

“O, Uncaused One, O, always between / form and form, O stream, O spark, / O antithesis, who dost mature into thesis. / Behold, already we have become like unto gods, / comprehending in Thee, that we do not exist.” (181-185)

This is the same sentiment expressed, with tragic tenderness, in the monitory verse “Legenda” [“Legend”] (Washington, 1949). The price of freedom, nay, of life itself, is eternal vigilance, i.e. keeping one’s eye on the real past, knowing whence we come, who we are, and having a healthy respect for the threats that face our civilization:

Who knows the beginning. We lived in this city / giving no care for the ages past. Its walls / seemed eternal to us. Those who lived / whenever before us, were already just a legend / never read. Our age is better, / we said. Neither plague, nor the sword’s edge / pursue us, so, why reach backward? / Let the ages of terror sleep in the dungeons of the earth. / We tuned instruments, the evenings / brought us rejoicing among friends, / beneath lanterns, in the greenery of chestnuts, / feasts were held. The lithe slenderness of our women / gladdened the eye. Painters chose / happy colors. Until that day arrived. (20-33)

“Legenda” may be considered a cardinal verse of sorts for Miłosz. For this poem is addressed both to the nations saved from “that day” of catastrophe (i.e. Western Europe, and that nation still fortunate enough to have so far avoided the trial by fire, v.g. the United States), and to his own nation, and those others of Eastern Europe, who are now on the other side of the crater, as it were:

And then, sitting where once stood / that beautiful city, sifting through our fingers / the sands of the desert, we discovered the sweet / name of the fatherland. It was only sand / and the sigh of wind in wormwood. For a fatherland / without a past is nothing. A word / that becomes senseless

before fully pronounced,<sup>21</sup> / a flimsy wall destroyed by flame, / the echo of bestial emotion. In the sand was / mixed the ashes of the ages with fresh blood. / And pride departed from us, while we made / a deep bow of respect to the past generations / and from this time, we had an abode in history. (49-61)

“A fatherland without a past is nothing.” These words are equally applicable to Europe and to America. For his compatriots, and the other nations forced into the same corral of relativism by the Soviets, these words are an inoculation against further attempts at depriving them of the historical ground beneath their feet,<sup>22</sup> and a reminder of what foundations the rebuilding—whenever that is to commence—should be grounded upon.

For America, that “all too proud country” (“Central Park,” 96), to which Miłosz was so little attracted, but which was to become of significant interest to him so very shortly, they are a plea for an acknowledgement of the Western civilization of which it is an outgrowth; a plea that the Americans learn from the mistakes of nations now living, practically, only in history, that they make better use of its wisdom.

In his 1970s reportage of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Ryszard Kapuściński, who lived through World War II himself and later witnessed so many other wars, writes:

The person who has survived a great war is different from him who never went through any war. They are two different types of people. They will never find a common tongue, because, really, war cannot be described, cannot be shared. One cannot say to someone—Here, take a bit of my war.<sup>23</sup>

The same thing can be said for civilizations. Although more than one American has suffered—continues to suffer—the effects of war as deeply as any European, the fact remains that the America that Miłosz experienced toward the middle of the last century, still protected by broad oceans east and west, and enjoying very good neighborly relations north and south, was a country powerfully secure in its isolation. We can go “over there,” but they can’t come over here. So did many Americans think, at least prior to 2001. This attitude, this fact of being so unaffected by the great defining tragedy of the European 1940s, was incomprehensible to Miłosz, and characterizes much of his America-centered poetry of the Atlantic period. As we see in his verse letter “Do Alberta Einsteina” [“To Albert Einstein”] (Washington, 1948):

I'm ashamed to speak loudly. I am provoked by a certain matter, / which is difficult to define. That matter of hope. / For I have seen enough people transformed into beasts / or imprisoned in the slavery of rote-imposed illusions. / And I write this in the capital of the United States. / It's summer. Birds are making a racket, and bright colored cars / speed along the boulevards. On the lawns, people / play ball or golf or barbecue hot dogs / on grills in the park. The radios on motorcycles / cry out something about spies, refugee criminals, / about the war, communists, about new weapons. / And this New Jerusalem of the old puritans, / the fulfillment of their dreams, if backwards, / is for me a burdensome, empty decoration. / As in a dream, I'd like to scream, but I cannot scream. (35-49)

The theme of the above-cited "Central Park" is, in the main, this blissful American ignorance, which to Miłosz's speaker seems an infuriating indifference. Can't they see? he asks Juliusz Kroński:

In the shady light of the trodden greensward / the girls lie motionless, in the embrace / of sailors. Before the picture changes / the dark arm endures, or the unbuttoned blouse. // Trees' long feathers beat from the basalt of the cliffs / the trees, the sprays of which flow down in strings. / And when nature becomes a theater, / silver machines glide on far aloft. // Covered with the dull rainbow of water vapor, / the abstract summits of the city tremble, / breaking the air into steep regions: / honeycombs of metal, or stalactites. (1-12)

Recalling the horrors of the recent war in the midst of this neo-Arcadian scene, the speaker continues, a bit further on:

A warning is contained in this reminiscence, / a warning for those who will sleep in soft beds: / that the bedsheet, stained with rose, / is not infrequently consumed by a wandering flame. // Whoever once passed the threshold of the microcosm, / in which human wonders are celebrated, / let that person know, that the vengeance of malicious fate / call out, with calmness, the indifferent, every day. // They hear not. As if the fresh earth / just sprouted forth the first palm after the flood. / They confide in one another with a trembling shiver / and they enter together the sexual glades. (21-32)

It is this which imbues the first "American" verses of Czesław Miłosz with the catastrophic qualities that marked much of his prewar poetry, as he sat in Wilno or Paris or Warsaw, anxious beneath the electric atmosphere of the hecatomb about to unfold. In lines that recall the afore-cited "Legenda," we are warned by the 1947 verse "Przypomnienie" ["A Reminder"]:



Undoubtedly, our world / is changing for the better. / The earth is now  
 subject / to the shining machine. / Misfortune visits / only regions of  
 misfortune, / while each of us is happy, / for we are free of guilt. / Sniffing  
 the ground, destiny / will lose our scent that leads here, / for the ocean  
 separates us / from evil Europe / and Liberty flashes her sign / to the  
 travelers on the ships. / O Greece, O Greece / who here remembers thee?  
 (17-32)

Why no one else in New York or Washington seems to be able to feel the imminent, potential catastrophe is disturbing.<sup>24</sup> The narrator of such poems is just as shocked at the American unconsciousness of the world having been changed by their very technology, in the atomic drops on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The “Trzy chóry...” end with these lines:

When, in the violet chapels of Amoco and Esso / the guardians of the  
 gasoline cult fall asleep, / their head resting on their elbows, beneath the  
 clock faces, / this is the hour, when on the outskirts of cities, / in the waste  
 lands of scrap iron and cardboard / dark figures light campfires, / and on  
 the wires above the shining boulevards, / the sparks of acetylene flash  
 crackling and die. / The day, the day. The red-breasted robin / standing  
 straight on the maple bough / sings in ecstasy. Transparent her song, /  
 Clear her song. drops of dew / rolling down, disappearing. O light, o day, /  
 O light, day. Spring day. (III: 18-31)

Is the narrator being unfair here? Certainly the American soul rebels against the snide and facile swipe at the perceived spiritual dearth of America, where gas-stations are the only chapels enjoying a regular weekly attendance.<sup>25</sup> But this is closer to the subject of the next section of our discussion, in which we will consider the poems written in America by Miłosz after he settled in an uneasy exile at one of the most prestigious centers of learning, in one of the most beautiful regions of the world. Right now, we leave the poet in 1951, in Mittelbergheim, a town in Alsatia, the name of which is significant, for it can be seen as the next caesura in his long life. He has made the difficult decision to leave Poland, such as it was, and chose the bitter bread of exile. With that chapter of his life over, he could, at least for a moment, accept the choice once made and breathe easier, momentarily *hors de combat*:

My eyes are still closed. Don't pursue me / Fire, power, force, because it's  
 too early. / I have lived many years and, as in a dream / I felt that I am  
 reaching the mobile border / beyond which color and sound are brought to  
 fruition / and united with the things of this world. / Do not yet pry open my  
 lips with force. / Allow me to trust, to believe, that I will reach it, / Let me  
 rest in Mittelbergheim. // I know that I should. By me are / Autumn and

wooden wheels and leaves / of tobacco drying under the eaves. Here and everywhere / is my land, wherever I shall turn / in whatever language I hear / the song of a child, the conversation of lovers. / More happy than others, I am to take / the glance, the smile, the star, the silk folded / along the line of the knees. Placid, watchful, / I am to walk along the mountain ridges, in the soft shine of the day / to the waters, cities, roads, customs. (8-27)

This is one of the more uncharacteristically calm verses ever written by Czesław Miłosz. One struggle was over, or at least suspended. But it would never really be completely over. It would resume, in different circumstances, in a different land. And it would transform his poetry, perhaps more than just a bit.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Andrzej Franaszek, “Wieczne światło zatrzymanego czasu” [“The Eternal Light of Time Stopped Still”], in Czesław Miłosz (1911-2004), special addition to the *Tygodnik Powszechny*, Kraków, August 22, 2004, pp. 10-15; p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> For a fairly exhaustive discussion of this, and other New York-related items in Miłosz’s life, see Beata Dorosz, “Czesław Miłosz in the Context of the Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences in America,” *The Polish Review* LVI (2010) 4:297-332.

<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that he ignores political themes. “Antygonia,” discussed below, was originally dedicated to the victims of the Rákosi dictatorship in Hungary (a dedication suppressed in all editions of his work published in pre-1989 Poland), and in poems such as “Niech nigdy” [“Never Let It Happen”], an undated, uncollected poem from the period 1948-1954, he comes out strongly in defense of individual free will and against all forms of totalitarian directioning of the individual human person.

<sup>4</sup> *Szczudło* means a prosthetic leg, of the pegleg type.

<sup>5</sup> Rio Preisner, *Česká existence* [Czech Being] (London: Rozmluvy, 1984), pp. 44-45.

<sup>6</sup> In his notes to the Treatise, the poet informs us that Part III deals in the first place, not with the Soviet occupation of Poland and the postwar monopolization of Poland by the U.S.S.R., but with Poland during the war, under the Nazi occupation. On the other hand, he identifies the “Spirit of History” with the *Zeitgeist* of Hegel, later appropriated by Marx, in his theory of historical determinism. Ironically, Miłosz asserts, given the behavior of the Nazis in Europe, Marxist theory was shown at the time to be a palatable option to the Poles.

<sup>7</sup> This is how lines 51-52 should be interpreted. The person who does not bend his will and his reason to the force and irrationality of the “spirit of history” will either indeed go insane—unable to process the absurdity of an entire human society acknowledging false as true—or, with dialectical logic, will be declared of

unsound mind and shuttled safely out of the way in an insane asylum. This is a frequent, well-documented practice in totalitarian nations, most of which sought to rationalize their actions according to the Marxist theories of so-called historical determinism.

<sup>8</sup> “Darkville,” an ironic term employed by the Enlightenment camp in 18<sup>th</sup> century Poland as a description of their “superstitious” opponents. It was revived in the twentieth century by Polish communists as a description of “reactionaries.”

<sup>9</sup> Thus Adam Wasilewski, cited by Anna Bikont and Joanna Szczęśna in *Lawina i kamienie: Pisarze wobec Komunisty* [The Avalanche and the Pebbles: Writers in the Face of Communism] (Warsaw: Prószyński i s-ka, 2006), p. 210.

<sup>10</sup> Cited by Bikont and Szczęśna, p. 211.

<sup>11</sup> There is something of a pun here which cannot be given back in English. *Pospolita rzecz* is a somewhat archaic form of *Rzeczpospolita*, which means “republic.” On the other hand *pospolita rzecz* literally means “common, i.e. simple thing.” By his decisions, the protagonist of Miłosz’s poem runs the risk of bringing destruction upon the state, the nation, and much more common things—like his neighbors, or his family.

<sup>12</sup> And yet how “German” it is, when considered against the Wagnerian background of Norse legend, in which Valhalla is eventually to fall to the incursions of the giants.

<sup>13</sup> The dedication of this poem reads: “This fragment, written in 1949, I dedicate to the memory of the Hungarian workers, students, and soldiers.”

<sup>14</sup> Juliusz Słowacki, in Kordian’s soliloquy on Mont Blanc, in the romantic drama *Kordian*.

<sup>15</sup> We agree with Michel Masłowski that the circumstances of his exile had an effect on Miłosz’s thinking as regards the *wieszcz* tradition, linking him in a way with Adam Mickiewicz and the “poet/prophet/legislators” of the Great Emigration of the 1830s. However, it is difficult to agree with Masłowski’s assertion that “choice, and not constraint, decided his destiny,” and his further linkage of the poet’s American exile with Mircea Eliade’s theory of the “myth of the center,” as if Miłosz were seeking out the USA, is a great stretch. That will be more apparent in the next chapter of our study. For Masłowski, see his “Czesław Miłosz: La conscience de l’émigré,” in in Hana Jechová and Hélène Włodarczyk, *Les effets de l’émigration et l’exil dans les cultures tchèque et polonaise* (Paris: Presses de l’université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1987), pp. 121-147.

<sup>16</sup> In saying this, I realize that at the time in which this poem was written, Miłosz was still in the service of the PRL. All the same, it would be naive to suppose that the inner struggle between remaining in that service and leaving his homeland for an uncertain exile were not already being played out.

<sup>17</sup> In subsequent years, with the continual waxing of his fame and authority, later generations of PIASA were to gladly advertise their connection with the Nobel laureate.

<sup>18</sup> So it may not be all that dramatic as we note in the preceding paragraph; the “death” he may fear is the death of his reputation, at the hands of the propaganda machine eager to besmirch him in the West.

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<sup>19</sup> In the sense of man's eternal fate being dependent upon his actions in the temporal sphere.

<sup>20</sup> In these lines Miłosz comes closest to Eliot's idea of "parallel paths" of time. Briefly, the Incarnation of Christ provided time with its meaning. Physical time is merely a continuum provided to man, in which he is to perform significant, good acts. Everything we do, Eliot says, is fraught with moral significance, either good or evil, which, once accomplished, becomes eternal and irrevocable. Man, therefore, is constantly walking with one foot, as it were, in temporality, and one in eternity. Happy those who realize this; they are living in the "eternal moment" of significance; realizing the eternal significance of their actions, they see these "two times," as Miłosz puts it in his verse, "like one." The others, even if cognizant of "the other time," i.e. eternity, look at it as a path to be trod when this one is finished. They do not comprehend the vital connection between the two. The illogicality of this view, is obvious. On the other hand, we have this description of his dualistyczny gorycz ["dualistic bitterness"] from "Wychowanie katolickie." Miłosz, as a young man, was strongly drawn to the sciences, and the "time of the physical sciences" confused his appreciation of the eternal present which God inhabits: "The time of the physical sciences is spatial. It cannot be imagined otherwise, than as a line stretching backward and forward into eternity. The theory of evolution is purely spatial. Thus, eternity either presents itself also like a line, or it escapes man's reason entirely. It is not easy to stumble across the idea that it signifies a 'time beyond,' that from some divine perspective, the destruction of Nineveh, the birth of Christ and the date written on my high school notebook are simultaneous; that from this perspective, after all, extent itself perishes, and an equal sign may be placed between the 'greatness' of a galaxy and an atom," p. 37. The young, and mature, Miłosz seemingly cannot fathom that, in eternity, all times are indeed present, because past and future, as orientation points, completely disappear, and are replaced by an extra-temporal measure, that of the value of events, not their temporal succession. Events, happening "in time," are, in eternity, judged as good or evil, not as before or after, great or small. It is curious that, as he continues, he himself comes to intimate the "moral" dimension of time, but gets it all wrong, falling into the easy dualistic fallacy of understanding all of time, and creation, and matter, as evil, and only the spirit, as good: "My favorites were the gnostics, the manicheans and the Albigensians [...] They understood necessity, which rules everything that exists in time, as the work of an evil demiurge, an opposite force to God, Whom, in this way, they placed beyond the pale. He endured in a sphere of His own, free of all responsibility, as the object of desire. And these desires were purified all the more, the more they were turned against the body, i.e. Creation." And in setting God in His impermeable, hermetically sealed sphere, they also deprive the sacrifice of Christ of all of its significance and efficaciousness, and make God irrelevant, as a force as unable to intervene in history as we are to grow tomatoes on Mars. It is not difficult to see how a precocious teenager with an affinity for the small print describing the heretics in his textbook to the history of Christianity might be fascinated by these thoughts. What is curious is how the mature poet was never to shake free of them. As we

shall see, his journey to California describes a poetic (not to say intellectual?) arc away from the Christian Weltanschauung, one that drew him ever closer, again, to the facile dualism of his school years.

<sup>21</sup> A more exact, if clumsy, translation of the Polish lines would be “A word that loses its sense when it is but half pronounced.” A striking thought, but enigmatic. This seems to suggest that “father” still has sense, but the extrapolation of this word, denoting a community of blood and strong ties of love, loses its sense before “land” leaves the lips. The Polish word *ojczyzna* contains *ojciec* [father] and the suffix *-yzna*, denoting patrimony, hence *ojczyzna*, “fatherland.”

<sup>22</sup> In this connection, see Preisner, *Česká existence* [Czech Being] (London: Rozmluvy, 1984), pp. 229-230. “Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism are indivisible in respect to one another. Their close cooperation in the work of the “colonization” of Europe is seen most clearly in the partitioning of Poland by Hitler and Stalin. All absurd border-lines in Central Europe describe the sphere of their coordinated actions, as well, indeed, as their attempts at the de-historicizing of the Central European nations, the reduction of their historical traditions and experiences to the level of simplified myths, and the transformation, via chauvinism, of the nations themselves into a faceless herd [...] The slogan of mythologized Husitism “us against the world” eloquently expresses the herd-psychology of chauvinism, which flourishes only along with the absolute negation of the “other.” [...] Such myths imprison the nation in an airtight package of its own land, fears, traumas, demons, uproot it not only from the organic body of its situation among its neighbors, but transplant it violently into its own vital “space,” the borders of which are determined by a surrounding vacuum. In myth, a numinous terror and an instinctive fear win the day through the petrification of all attempts at a real historical retrospection, real historical collection.”

<sup>23</sup> Ryszard Kapuściński, “Bitwa o wzgórze Golan” [“The Battle for the Golan Heights”], in *Chrystus z karabinem na ramieniu* [Christ With a Rifle Slung over His Shoulder] (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 2008), pp. 47-48.

<sup>24</sup> He does note, in “Central Park,” that terror, if momentary, does sweep across the smiling faces in New York: “However, even here, in the center of Manhattan, / I might see, how at the warning sound, / their faces, beneath the flash of the screen pale, / and a sudden terror weakens their knees,” 33-36. Is the “warning sound” a news report, that reminds them of the threats prowling about the world just beyond the borders of America? Or is it perhaps something less subtle, like the air-raid sirens heard during the sudden drills in the jumpy 1950s?

<sup>25</sup> In his essay “Czesław Miłosz: a Testament of Exile,” Jarosław Anders was to write of the later Miłosz “watch[ing] with curiosity the inanity of American consumerism.” Whether or not Anders is justified in using such tired cultural shorthand—and assuming that the reader concurs in the assessment—it is a valid description of one characteristic of the poet’s approach to the country of his exile. See Jarosław Anders, *Between Fire and Sleep: Essays on Modern Polish Poetry and Prose* (New Haven: Yale, 2009), p. 68.

## CHAPTER THREE

### MIŁOSZ'S CALIFORNIA EXILE: 1960-1980

As early as 1947, while still serving at the Embassy in Washington, Miłosz came to terms with the inexorably moving stream of time. In the poem “Na śpiew ptaka nad brzegami Potomaku” [“On a Bird’s Song Heard on the Banks of the Potomac”], his narrator muses, not on his nation’s taking up its residence in history, as in “Legenda,” but on his own moving forward, and away, from a personal past that can be revisited no more than can the prewar Poland of his childhood and youth:

Why should I once more enter those dark classrooms / of King Zygmunt August High School, / or strike at the pines along the path from Jaszuny with a whip, as Słowacki once did? / On the banks of the Mereczanka, were those our games / or those of King Władysław’s courtiers, / our loves and partings, / or the loves from the songs of the Philomathic Brotherhood? / I no longer remember. O bird, O graceful bird, / You, who today sing me just the same song / as the Indian hunter once heard here / standing with his bow on a deer path, / What can you know about the change of generations / or of the succession of forms in the course of one / human life? Those footprints of mine / have been effaced not only by the rush of winters and autumns. / I have been the witness of misfortune, I know what it means, / to falsify life with the color of memories. / With joy I listen to your beautiful notes / on the great earth, renewed by spring. / My home in this instant: in it, the beginning of the world. / Sing! Upon the pearl of ashen waters / scatter the dew of song from the banks of the Potomac! (16-38)

There is no sadness in this poem. Although he can never again measure those same paths (why should he? he asks), their memory does not pain him, and, what is more, he shows an energetic willingness to move on.

Move on he will, literally and figuratively. In October, 1960, Miłosz, in French exile, received an offer from the University of California, Berkeley, to come and teach as a visiting lecturer at the Department of

Slavic Languages and Literatures. In the following year, the position would be made permanent. He was to remain at Berkeley until the early 90s, when he would return to Kraków for the final years of his life.

Of course, the great event of his California years will be his reception of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1980. In this section of our discussion, we will consider the verses published between these two important dates, 1960 and 1980. These twenty years saw the appearance of four volumes of poetry: *Król Popiel i inne wiersze* [*King Popiel, and Other Poems*, 1962], *Gucio zacczarowany* [*Gucio Spellbound*, 1965], *Miasto bez imienia* [*City Without a Name*, 1969] and *Gdzie wschodzi słońce i kędy zapada* [*Where the Sun Rises, and Where it Sets*, 1974], plus a few poems not included in larger collections.

Of the titles listed above, the most eloquent in the context of Miłosz's California years is *Gdzie wschodzi słońce i kędy zapada*. Where does the sun rise? For Miłosz, it continues to rise and shine in the East, over Lithuania. Where does it set? In the West, in California, where, like Mozart's librettist Lorenzo da Ponte in his Pennsylvanian exile, he felt cut off from all that informed him heretofore.<sup>1</sup> He is like a plant violently uprooted from its native soil and left to wither in a merciless waste land beneath a pitiless sun. One of the more poignant references to the loneliness of a Californian exile, in which, cut off from his native culture, he feels himself made irrelevant,<sup>2</sup> is the short poem "Władca Albanii" ["Ruler of Albania"], dated Berkeley, 1972:

But perhaps my debt has already been paid, / and I've done what I could  
for my language, / knowing that, in exchange, I would be silenced? [...] I  
have become the great poet of the kingdom of Albania. / And the smile of  
the lady of the court, the kindness of the regent, / would be today,  
unfortunately, but a belated reward. (1-3; 5-7)

Yet the process of deracination began much earlier, in France, if not indeed even earlier than that. The poems found in the volume *Król Popiel* continually reverberate with a questioning of European primacy, of the value of European culture in the aftermath of World War II and the imposition of the Soviet system on Eastern Europe. And thus the alienation expressed by Miłosz has a temporal, as well as spatial, nature. The poem "Z chłopia król" ["From Peasant, King"] from this volume is almost too obvious a comment on the Soviet *Machtergreifung*, which set a clique of "workers and peasants" in the halls of government. They are incompetent; as if an anti-illustration of the classical, Aquinian ideal of monarchical government, which postulates the king as a selfless servant of the people, expending himself for the good of the people he governs.

Miłosz here gives us the perfect example of the exploitative Aquinian tyrant. This “peasant king” is motivated, not by a sense of responsibility, but rather by a simplistic, leveling urge to wreak vengeance on those who have personally offended him:

I gaze at them, pretending to have my eyes closed / in fat drowsing. And I play the fool every day. / Thus will I remain in their memories for all time. / I know that I will never see another world. // As for me, then? I have a hatred that festers in me, / a lamp that gladdens me, a wedding torch. / What I'm thinking, no one will guess from the stupid expression on my face. / Thus, and not otherwise, my life will be fulfilled. (9-16)

Nor does he waste any time in slaking his bloodlust. The very next poem in the collection, “Na ścięcie damy dworu” [“On the Beheading of a Lady at Court”] moves from the simplistic theory of absolute power to its bloody praxis, when abused. The noblewoman in question is a beauty such as caught the peasant-king's attention when, before his unexpected elevation to the throne, he would see them pass by. Her crime? Laughing at him when he clumsily doffed his cap in greeting:

Bitch. Even now. You hung your pink tongue / out, crawling up to me, without makeup or frontlet. / And thus, on all fours, with the fur of your frizzy head / at my shoe, you beg for mercy? // So, why were you such a cold statue back then, since now you are but a shade, / back then, when the rustle of your skirts made me burn? / Let that, what I chased (in you), be forgotten. / An apple that I snip from my branch. // Today I am great. Greatest in the entire region, / and I pronounce my sentence. Servants—take her to the hangman. (9-18)

Now, were there not bluebloods with long royal pedigrees stitching together the noble houses of Europe that acted just as arbitrarily, just as cruelly? Undoubtedly. Power does tend to corrupt, and St. Thomas' ideal monarch is just that—a rare ideal, perhaps impossible to realize in this world of mortal reflections. Still, the ideal is important, and those long pedigrees are more than records of DNA; they describe a long tradition of education to leadership, preparation for the status a fortunate birth has fated for one, a predisposition both technical and moral that, more often than not, worked tolerably well. In these poems, Miłosz states quite blandly that—whatever the Socialist dreams of his school years may have been—he does not accept the quasi-Rousseauan communist ideal of the moral superiority of the downtrodden classes, or the primacy of common sense over the restraints imposed upon our reactive, emotion-based thought processes by philosophical and moral education. His peasant-king



is little more than a beast: uncomfortable in the presence of his refined betters, simple in his motivations (erotic) and solutions (murder by fiat) when he is crossed, when his desires are frustrated.

Yet it is not east of the Oder where Miłosz senses this loss of the familiar, firm European ground. In “W Mediolanie” [“In Milan”], also from *Król Popiel*, he comes closest to those postwar Absurdist who declared European culture not only compromised, but dead:<sup>3</sup>

Visiting a factory is like visiting a prison. / The guides are proud of the leniency of the punishment. / Glass and aluminum in the Olivetti shops, / nurseries, apartments, the background of alpine mountains. /.../ In this machine-filled hangar. I saw their eyes, / century after century passed in the machine-filled hangar. / Behold the product most “finished” in the world, / with a mind that shines through the skin like the sun. // It’s not about how many *liras* they earn each day, / how much bread costs, meat and wine. / It’s not about whether or not their children go off to summer camp. / I’m no social democrat. // The fingers that mixed the faded colors of Siena, / the eyes guessing the thoughts of another man. / The royal human majesty, shut up for eight hours. / And a film with kisses, bullets. (II:1-4; 17-28)

We find a similar attitude, in despair of bankrupt modern Europe, in “Ile świątecznych zamiarów” [“How Many Marvelous Intentions”], a poem composed in Berkeley in 1970 and collected in *Gdzie wschodzi słońce i kędy zapada*:

Whoever had a brain, chose doctrines, / in which devilish dry rot gleamed, pulsing. / Whoever had a heart, allowed himself to be seduced by love for humanity. / He who wanted beauty, served his term, stone by stone. / This is how our century paid back those, who trusted / its despair and its hope. / And what did it mean “to win?” To grow silent in the middle of a word. / To hear a scream, homage to untruth, for truth has perished. / To pretend kinship, carefully skirting the graves / and, counting oneself among the chosen / to feel, over the entire extent of one’s body / shame. (11-22)

Miłosz’s narrator appears here in the guise of Marlowe’s—or Goethe’s, for that matter—Faust, at the start of his story, when, considering the four medieval faculties he has mastered in his brilliant university career, he finds each of them wanting and discards them as useless. Yet unlike Faust, who doubts the existence Hell even when the devil himself stands before him, the narrator of “Ile świątecznych zamiarów” has no illusions. He might repeat after Mephistopheles “Why, this is Hell, nor am I out of it;” he seeks no esoteric knowledge of the black arts to

satisfy his still thirsting intellect; he has arrived at a logical, if far from satisfying, answer to his question. He too is responsible for the crisis of European culture; the bankruptcy of European civilization renders its products, like himself, without sufficient funds to cover any check they might wish to write.

Yet life, ironically, goes on. Paris still exists, even if he can no longer contact with it, as if the new postwar reality of the city he once intimately knew has imposed an Urdu-only rule upon its inhabitants and he, bewildered, wanders helplessly among familiar streets, a “reeling passer-by /stumbling/ through the street-market after losing the power of speech,” (“Biel” [“Whiteness”], 9). Life goes on, though by all rights it shouldn't, as he puts in “Elegia dla N.N.” [“An Elegy, for N.N.”]:

But the heart dies not, when it would seem that it ought to, / we smile,  
there is tea and bread on the table. / And only the pang of conscience, that  
we didn't love, as we should have, / the poor ashes in Sachsenhausen, /  
with an absolute love, beyond the measure of man. (32-36)

The narrators of verses like this come close to despair at times. However, like Job, whose story Miłosz was to translate later in life, their cries of despair are never a letting go, an acquiescence to the black. They are a protest: “Look, this is the way things seem to stand. But it just isn't possible that this is the way they are!” Even if the distance between the narrator and the familiar (a distance of time as well as space) would convince him of the impossibility of effective communication, even with himself:

And if, on a summer night, the boats on the lake, / and the soft song,  
holding hands, / are preserved by your elegant and perishing memory, / it  
was neither just like that, as it once seemed, / nor as it seems to be now,  
when you fashion your story, (“Zmienił się język,” / “The Language has  
Changed,” / 17-21)

still he will not allow himself—is not allowed—to fall silent in a comfortable, sarcastic resignation. The coal has been placed to his lips, and he must speak, even if in “Albanian,” i.e. to no one but himself. Witness the second chorus to Part I of *Gdzie wschodzi słońce i kędy zapada*:

Beneath the dark blue cloud, with its glint of a roan horse / what has been,  
I recognize unclearly. / The rags of my name fall away from me / and the  
stars in the waters grow small. / Again, that unnamed one speaks for me, /

and opens the disappearing, sleepy houses, / so that I might write about  
deserts here, / beyond sea and land. (2: 19-26)

This, I believe, is the essence of Miłosz's heroism, in that most difficult of all trials he was to undergo as a poet, being cut off some six thousand miles from his homeland, set in a land where no one understood the tongue he was stubbornly dedicated to, a land where his thoughts and words were circumscribed to a literary ghetto and deprived of the efficacy and influence he might have had, in Poland. What does his tiny, Polish voice, mean in the colossus of America, unaware of his existence save as taxpayer or newspaper subscriber? For his narrators constantly suggest that his journey to California was a journey to oblivion. "Have I broken the sound barrier?"] he asks ironically in the fourth verse of "Po ziemi naszej" ["Over our Land"]:<sup>4</sup>

And then clouds with cathedrals, / ecstatic green past the sculpted iron  
gates / and silence, so different from any I had heretofore known, that it  
makes me wonder. / I am here next to the little fist of an old woman,  
wrapped around with a rosary, / and the tapping of a cane on the flagstone  
among the dappled shades. / Shame or no shame / that's how it turned out  
for me.

Yet he never gives up seeking his bearings in the bewildering wilds of exile, never ceases to seek new authorities to help him re-build the foothold washed out from beneath him by history. There is a sarcasm to the lines which just precede the above cited verse four from this cycle:

If I was to describe what the world is to me / I would take a hamster, a  
hedgehog or a mole, / sit him on a seat one evening in the theater / and,  
pressing my ear up to his wet little snout / I would listen to what he has to  
say about the floodlights, / the sound of the music and the motions of the  
ballet.

There is a serious side to this as well. If man's civilization has proved itself broken, can the poet turn to nature? We cannot forget the poet's spiritual, almost pagan delight in the Lithuanian nature of his childhood. Can he turn to nature for a new, fundamental wisdom?

The answer is yes. For the shipwreck of his particular, European civilization has uncovered a hopeful truth, confirmed by the prehistoric Lascaux paintings which preceded that Europe by so many millennia. All culture is dependent on nature, and as long as nature survives, so will the possibility of a new, better, nascent culture. In "Te korytarze" ["These Corridors," from *Gucio zaczarowany*] we read:

In the fir woods above a stream falling from a glacier / the doe will give birth to the spotted fawn and the air will unravel / its beautiful, leafy spirals to other eyes, as it once did mine. / And once more will be discovered every joy of the early morning, / every flavor of the apple plucked in the high orchard. / So I can be at peace concerning the things I loved. / The earth will bear aqueducts, amphoras, brass candlesticks. / And when, one day, dogs chasing a bear / will fall into a rocky cleft and people of a later generation / will read on the walls our angular letters—/ they will be surprised that we knew so much about what delights them, / although our vain little palace already means so little. (11-22)

This poem, dated Oregon-Berkeley 1964, written at the outset of Miłosz's exile, seeks to transcend space divisions such as Europe/America, Sztejnie/Berkeley, and establish a homeland in eternity. Yet that homeland is as unreachable in this life as Plato's realm of forms, and thus Miłosz's poetic personae will be faced to search for new foundations on the West Coast.

More than a guide, however, for the exiled Miłosz Nature is a comforting guarantor of continuity—as minimal and basic as that may be. He is a man formed by European civilization, bankrupt or not, and cannot cease defining his humanity within the limits of culture and civilization. Whether or not we Americans are naive or wrong-headed in our continuing, romantic, almost Rousseauish love of wilderness, there is a difference between products of American culture, and products of Europe. Where we see majesty and splendor, the European man, formed by cities much different from our own, tends to see wastelands.<sup>5</sup> Miłosz too, despite his quasi pagan veneration of the wilds of Lithuania and the comfort he derives therefrom, even with his connection of the passing of Europe, so to speak, with a *Kulturdämmerung*, tries to find his bearings in exile via geographical triangulation. This is the background of the cycle *Kronika miasta Pornic* [*The Town Chronicles of Pornic*] collected in *Król Popiel*.

Pornic is a fishing and resort town on the Atlantic coast of France, Miłosz's first country of postwar exile. The eight poems that make up the cycle reflect the banished poet's reconstruction of the foreign surroundings he has been thrust into—not unlike the prototype of exiled poets, Ovid—and away from the familiar milieu of homeland. The significance of Pornic, the history of which Miłosz traces from the early XVth century through the conclusion of World War II, is history itself, the real, tangible record of man's presence in this spot, which was once as wild as any Amazonian jungle. The presence of familiar figures from his own past concretizes the region, makes it his own; here it was that an earlier Polish poet in exile, Juliusz Słowacki, wrote a portion of his *Genезis z ducha*

[*Genesis from Spirit*]. And even though the narrator of Miłosz's poem is ambivalent towards his romantic predecessor, he identifies with him, and, one feels, is pleased at the opportunity to "address" someone in his native tongue—again, even if that address is not devoid of irony, poking fun at an idealism which no longer seems possible. In the poem "Słowacki," he states:

When you walked about here, there was heather and broom, / little black sheep were at pasture amidst the druidic stones, / notaries and merchants were building villas, / their beds, their mirrors, with reflections of piled hair pinned high, / and the naked arms above bushy shadow / walk about the sky in the flickering of candles. / O brother of Atessa on the heights of Luxor! / You were not the brother of the snake who gazed into the sun. / Separated for all times, consciousness and unconsciousness. / Why is it that you spoke so much? Everybody like you grows appalled / because life is final and death is final. / But here—I give you this glass of cognac. (16-27)

Another, more contemporary Polish accent, is provided by the graves of Polish soldiers, male and female, in the nearby British War Cemetery. Standing over the grave of a certain Captain S. Makowski, a paratroop in the Polish formations of the British Army who rests beside his comrade-in-arms Muriel Byck, Miłosz's speaker links the dead man with Słowacki, and himself, and the prospect of an unexpected, unplannable life, and death, far from home:

Again you're not paying attention, Makowski! And the teacher of Polish literature nobly recites the incipit of "Genesis from the Spirit." *Here, somewhere behind me, / burn golden and silver cliffs pinpointed with mica / like the shields of giants dreamt by the eyes of Homer, / here, where the sun is shot forth...* / Makowski wasn't paying attention. Makowski wanted to go out onto the ball field. / He couldn't ever guess, that he was to become part of this very landscape, / nor that Muriel Byck was running about London at the time, / his lifelong friend, his friend even when life would be past. ("British War Cemetery," 29-38)

The ethnic, one might almost say genetic, link between Makowski and Miłosz's narrator allows the latter to set the individual—the otherwise unknown Captain and his own unnamed self—strongly in the real history of the world, in the reality of "here and now," which organically rests upon and grows from "then." However, more interesting is his concern for the WAAF resting at Makowski's side, Muriel Tamara Byck:

Beneath a headstone with the Star of David, / "our one child, our dearest daughter." // Mr. Richard, the keeper of the cemetery, / (I was brought to him by the butcher's boy), said: / "Ah, them two? They were great friends. / They died in the last year of the war. / They brought them here from far away, from the Pyrenees. / Nobody knows what their mission was. / Miss Byck was the daughter of Russian emigrants." (20-28)

No ties, national or religious, link Makowski with Byck, yet they were "great friends," so great, we are tempted to suggest, that they rest together in the same sort of stony *thalamos* as a modern Antigone and Haemon. This is important, as is the inscription on her headstone, in which religion and nationality are superseded by something more elemental, the parental devotion and grief of two human beings for their only child. In this way, the narrator poses the question, to himself no less than to us: just what does homeland signify? What am I being banished from? A condition necessary to my very existence, or a fictional construct of faith, ethnicity, language and tradition, into which I merely happened to be born?

And thus, although the matter of the exile of the particular, Polish and European person, from a specific geographical location (Poland, Europe), will continue to oppress him in his verse (especially that written in California), Miłosz's taking of historical bearings leads him to a series of human identifications deeper than nationality and tongue, and arrived at not through geographical, but rather moral, coordinates.

The Abbé Galipaud, from *Kronika miasta Pornic*, is the first of several prototypes of exile with whom Miłosz identifies in the early period of his banishment:

Father Galipaud was no patriot / and he refused to swear on the Constitution. / So he hid out in grottos and celebrated Masses / in houses far out on the heath. Sentries of armed peasants / signaled one another with owl cries. / Besieged, he found safety in the bastion of the castle / of the Marquise Brie-Serrant, until the corvette "Alcyon" / on its mission of rescuing the priests of Brittany, arrived in these waters. / Disguised as a sailor, he gazed with despair at the shore / when the ship, with sails furled, drew out of the gulf. / It passed the island of Noirmoutier and took its course for the south. / Galipaud died in exile, in San Sebastian, longing. ("Galipaud," 2-13)

It's not hard to see why Miłosz would pen such a sympathetic portrait of the priest. Yet even greater than him, in this matter of moral coordinates, are the Marquise Brie-Serrant and her daughter, who were ready and willing to go to their graves—again the Antigone motif we have

seen so often in Miłosz's poetry—on his behalf. In “Dziedzice” [“The Heirs”], we read:

Marquise Brie-Serrant and her daughter Anne / were arrested for hiding  
 Father Galipaud. / They did not lower their gaze, seated in the diligence, /  
 for their duty had been done. / On the road to Nantes, in Moutiers, to be  
 exact, / drunk men punished them for their pride. / The revolutionary  
 tribunal pronounced its sentence / and they did not cry in the death cell. (1-  
 8)

Unlike the father of the family, “beheaded in Paris for complicity in the plot / to tear the king away to freedom, right at the guillotine’s steps,” 16-17, the marquise and her daughter were saved by a bold action of the sailors from the corvette *Alcyon*, who rescued them on the very last mile of their journey to the scaffold. But the fact of their not becoming martyrs is nothing in comparison with their good will in offering the ultimate sacrifice in the name of something higher than political expediency, or their own living hide. The readiness is all. And with this, the motif of exile, not as a final blow, a political and cultural death, but as a redemption from the jaws of annihilation, a rescue, begins to surface in the cycle. In the poem entitled “Madonna Ocalenia” [“Our Mother of Rescue”]—what a pregnant title that, in connection with the earlier collection *Ocalenie*—the speaker considers the seaside chapel of the Madonne de Recouvrance, set there as a votive for lives spared from the raging sea:

O Mother, rescue me, my sinful life; / return me to the beautiful terra  
 firma, grant me a little more time. / O Mother, I do not deserve this, but I  
 will begin anew. / You did not live far away, for you are near me. / And in  
 their cowls streaming with water, barefoot, with bowed heads, /  
 wondering: why did she save me? / they went to offer on her altar the  
 candle they had vowed. / And later they drank, squalled, made bold with  
 women. / Her smile indicated that it all was according to her will. (16-24)

Mary smiles, not at how easily they take up again the “sinful life” they promised to leave behind while in danger, but in satisfaction at the resumption of robust life. Martyrdom is not the only option, and may not always be the best. Miłosz’s narrator here comes to terms with the fact of life going on, revolving and progressing outside the heretofore exclusive *Ojczyzna*; thus exile sheds its black mourning weeds, and he steps away from the grave to consider the world from a broader perspective.

The speaker is lifted out of particularism, moved to consider the possibility of being called to a different role in a scheme that surpasses the

boundaries of nation and language. He may not understand why he has been saved or what the heavens have in store for him, but perhaps his rescue is not without meaning and thus should be accepted, not with bitterness and despair, but with gratitude and a humble *fiat voluntas tua*:

During the Mass, a girl, like the Sybil / turns the pages of the book on the pulpit. / The letters are as big as two hands. / It is the song in honor of the Madonna de Recouvrance / (*May she protect this sweet corner of France*). / I begged God to do with me what He will / and told Him, that I am grateful / even for the insomnia that comes when the incoming tide / and the examination of my past life boom in my ears. (9-17)

Thus ends the poem “Pornic,” and with it the entire cycle. A reconnaissance has been achieved, a territory, moral rather than geographical, made familiar. And with this humbling experience, the knowledge that God has so far asked so little of him in comparison with what He demanded of Makowski, Byck, and the Brie-Serrants, Miłosz's narrator is ready to move forward, from certain bearings.

These fatal considerations (if so we may term them without prejudice) will lead him to California, and still greater challenges. The first prototype of European exile here will be the Blessed Father Junipero Serra, that intrepid Franciscan, who first conquered native California for New Spain and Rome, and the Christian civilization which formed Miłosz too. It was, as the poet puts it in the tantalizingly entitled cycle *Po ziemi naszej*, a daunting task. Fr. Serra was, after all, reaching across a gigantic cultural divide:

Father Junipero, born on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, brought them the good news about our first parents, about symbols, the promise, the anticipation. He told them, exiles, that there, in the homeland, the guilt has been washed away, just like they wash away dust from their brows, with a splash of water. It was like something they had heard long ago. But, poor fellows, they had lost the gift of concentration, and the preacher had to hang around his neck a grilled haunch of deer in order to hold their gluttonous eyes. But then they smacked their lips so loudly, that he couldn't speak. (12: 22-32)

Where the Franciscan succeeded, despite being so close to despair, Miłosz is doomed to fail—despite the seeming success of his post-exilic fate. For Fr. Junipero began the process, at San Diego and Carmel and up the coast, that would transform the wilds of the pagan West into the oasis of Spanish California. Miłosz, writing in the United States of the 1960s, has no chance at re-creating it, re-converting it, in his European image.



The only thing that can possibly undergo transformation, indeed, is himself. He must be ready to be re-shaped:

Nonetheless it is they who took possession, in my name, / of the cliffs  
upon which only mute dragons / have sunned themselves from the  
beginning, crawling out of the sea. / They sewed a cape of woodpecker,  
hummingbird and tanager feathers / and, casting aside its flap with their  
brown arm, they pointed with their hand and said: this. / And from that  
time, this country was conquered: seen. (12: 33-38)

This truth is emphasized once more in the fourteenth and final verse of the cycle. Here the prototypical exile is Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, author of the *Relación [...] de lo acaecido en las Indias en la armada donde iba por gobernador Pánfilo de Narváez [Chronicle of the Narváez Expedition]*, whose harrowing tale of shipwreck and life among the American Indians from 1527-1536 Miłosz summarizes in brilliant poetic shorthand:

Cabeza, if anyone knew everything about civilization, that man is you. /  
You Castilian bookkeeper, what possessed you / to wander to such places,  
where there was no concept, / no number, no dash of pen dipped in  
inkwell, / but a boat tossed up on the sand by the swells, / and crawling  
about naked beneath the immobile eyes of the Indians, / and their sudden  
cry in the desert of sky and sea, / a lament: that even the gods suffer  
misfortune. / For seven years you were the prophesied god, / bearded,  
white-skinned, and beaten, if the miracle did not come about. / Seven years  
of marching from the Gulf of Mexico to California, / the hu-hu-hu of the  
tribes, the hot thorn of the continent. / And later? Who am I? the lace of  
these cuffs / are not mine, the table with carved lions not mine, the fan of  
Doña Clara, / her satin slipper beneath her skirts—no, no. / On all fours!  
On all fours! / Daub your thighs with warpaint. / Lick the ground. Wha  
wha, hu hu.

Speaking with me about this poem in 2009, Robert Hass suggested that the final lines constitute a palpable reference to Witold Gombrowicz, with whom Miłosz was in frequent contact at the time of its writing. This is quite probable, but there is a subtle distinction to be noted. Whereas in the case of the so-called “Polish Moses,” who “wished to lead his people out of the slavery of Polishness”<sup>6</sup> by waging sarcastic war on all the traditions his countrymen hold dear and define themselves by, for Miłosz, the reduction to the bestial is not humorous, but tragic. Here, the emphasis is redirected from the sufferings of the European traveler in the foreign wilds of American Barbary to his continued isolation after returning home. In

the concluding lines of the poem quoted above, Cabeza de Vaca, who experienced extreme cultural isolation in the pagan Americas, returns home to Spain so changed by the experience that he is again set apart from human converse, from his mother culture. Is he now above Spain, does he justly reject that civilization that gave him birth, but no longer "fits?" This would be too simplistic a reading; after all, the position of refusal he assumes in lines 13-18, on all fours, licking the earth, whooping his primitive war/rutting-cries, is hardly the image of the noble savage more elevated than corrupt Europe in simple virtue. But then we return to the preceding verse in the cycle, poem number 13, and we are met with this impression of the "civilized" European world:

The swing flies up into the sky, and those gazing up from below / catch their breath in delight at the sight of the darkness beneath the skirt. / Who has not dreamt of the castles of the Marquis de Sade? / When *ah ah ah* one rubs one's hands / and sets to work: to prick the flesh of maidens / set on the starting line, with spurs, / or have the naked nuns in fishnet stockings / spank one with a paddle, biting the bedclothes. (13: 8-15)

Between the heroic age of Spanish exploration, the fearless martyrdom of the Franciscans in the West/Southwest, the extreme testing of the human person to which Cabeza de Vaca was subjected, and Miłosz's twentieth-century exile to those same shores,<sup>7</sup> we have the inexcusably frivolous and perverse world of the Rococo, with its Fragonards and De Sades. Is this the civilization that meets the eyes of Cabeza upon his return? Is this the reality behind the civilizational ideal to which he remained faithful, from which he derived the strength necessary to survive his ordeal? Again, while this is not the *whole* picture of Europe, it is an authentic slice of it. In the end, although the matter is far from simple to interpret, it seems as if Miłosz is taking the side of his American exiles over the moral lightweights who remained at home for no one's benefit. America may be a challenge, a bewilderment, but it stands before the poet as a wild that must be traversed, must be plunged into, even, and perhaps especially, at the risk of his being fundamentally changed by it. And even if that transformation is to be a painful, unwelcome experience.

And indeed in Miłosz's case it is not pleasant. Stubbornly grounded, one might say, in his Lithuanian-Polish identity, he cannot identify himself without the European priority. His awareness of his spatial distance from his homeland awakens in him a striking revolt against the physics of geography in Part III (Lauda) of *Gdzie słońce wschodzi i kędy zapada*:

No, there shouldn't be any spatial dimension here. / But I speak to you, and you, standing before me, / in sunlight supposedly similar, / in the nighttime almost identical, / and here even a drop of rain rolls as it does there. // But this is a different space. The kings come a greeting / the shepherds sing from the streets, / the lions in the arcades kneel down / and proclaim the miracle. // And we, encased in amber, with trumpets and fiddles, / Run, hasten, praise the life that has passed / because what happened then, we look upon now without pain. // Unexpectedly, in my hand I hold a scepter, / or perhaps an infant's rattle, so that I should confirm,<sup>8</sup> / once the shame has passed and I can confess to it, / that still and all I have suffered much. // That's not exactly right, *scepter*. It's a whip. / Or rather a strap to slap flies, so that I'd settle down at home, / listening intently at the window / for my neighbor to drive up home, / But all the same, quiet: the pump at the well screeches. (1-20)

Space cruelly distances one from where one would rather be, and although the narrator realizes that he is not free from the fault of idealizing, and thus falsifying, the past (10-12), still, his distance from the one land that nourishes his roots has led to a devolution of his person to powerlessness. Like Antaeus, he cannot be separated from his native earth without losing his vital strength; the attribute of his power, which had once been a scepter (13) undergoes a progressive devaluation until he is left holding a flyswatter in line 18—that ultimate symbol of inertia and powerlessness wielded by the declining lords of the front porch. His only escape is into the fantasy world he does not trust, listening in the quiet for the rusty echo of a pump at a well so many miles, and years, away.

But the passage of time also impels one away from the comforting familiar, which must be held on to, frantically even. In “Dytyramb” [“Dithyramb”], written in 1965, he allows himself a submersion in the present moment in such a way as to create something of an eternal capture in amber, as described above:

So much have we seen on the earth, and the mountains of malachite at sunset are greeted as always with song and a reverent bow. // That same springtime dance calls to us, when, beneath the ruins of the basalt cliffs a flock of birds dives through the transparent waters of the bay. // And the sea otter flashes his webbed hand, rolling in the foam near Point Lobos. // And in the mist flashes the red of azaleas from the depths of the humid vales. // Nothing has been added and nothing has been taken away, you unmoved, perfect, untouchable world. (1-10)

This sort of simple, imagistic poetry, almost oriental in precision and understatement, was to become the great formal discovery of his California years. Yet even here he must go on to a rational consideration

of the process of cognition. And he finds that, whether or not the amber moment is a possibility, such moments cannot be collected and studied at leisure, like prehistoric insects caught in the golden flood. Memory is nowhere near precise:

The memory of nothing has been preserved which certainly would be ours. [...] Who will confirm, who will say “mine” about the vain, vain, dream, conjured with difficulty? // Our dead move about with the rustle of renaissance fabrics. They look about themselves and place a finger on their lips. // Comrades in armor have sat down at the chessboard, setting their castle-like helms aside. // And the erotic power, the live gold in the blood, forever annihilates our empty name. (11-12, 20-27)

The passage of time places us just as far away from our desire as does the distance imposed by space. Even more so: we are not the eternal inhabitants of the earth; the successive generations coming after us usurp our place, and we recede into a non-existence (rather than an existence somewhere else), as empty and unreachable as that of our ancient forebears in silk, armor, or homespun. Here, in the concluding lines of the poem, the narrator describes the creative act, that closest, most real of all human contacts, by which man validates woman's reality, and vice versa, as the very motor of our destruction, our growing irrelevance.

Yet as we have seen so many times already, Miłosz is too vital a presence to give himself over entirely to despair. And—religious aspects aside for the moment—the eternal irrelevance of death, the passing over into the ranks of the eternally distant, where yesterday's obituaries are set up alongside Renaissance *memento mori* and the faint ochre circles of prehistoric burials<sup>9</sup>—is as yet a distant eventuality, a bridge to be crossed when arrived at. This is now; we exist in the present moment, and that present moment must be dealt with.

Miłosz's narrator does this, programmatically, with the opening verse of *Gucio zaczarowany*, “Była zima” [“It was winter”]. As if consciously glancing the present, odd aspect of a northern California winter off the Baltic colds of his youth, the title of the poem hearkens back to his first collection of verse entitled *Trzy zimy* [*Three Winters*], and the first two stanzas underscore his spatial dislocation from the familiar:

It was winter, just such a winter as occurs in this valley. / After eight dry months the rains fell / and the straw-colored mountains turned green for a little while. / In the ravines as well, where the old laurel tree / unites its stony roots with the granite, / certainly, the current once more took possession of its ancient stream bed. / The ocean wind frothed the eucalyptus trees, / and from beneath the clouds, structures broken open

with crystal, / the dockyards glowed with their spiny lamps. // This is not such a place, where on the flags of the piazza, / one gazes at the crowd from beneath the café awning, / nor is it such a place where one plays on a flute beneath the windows hanging over a narrow street, / where the sandals of children slap loudly in the vaulted passageway. (1-13)

The Polish word that we try to give back as “dislocation” is *wyobcowanie*. More or less literally translated, it means one’s person made suddenly foreign through interaction with the world, with others. This is the state that Miłosz’s narrator finds himself in, and in his search for antecedents, patterns, he finds that the earliest Europeans in these parts, the Spanish missionaries and the pioneers, must have undergone this same dislocating experience:

They had heard of a land broad and completely empty, / set apart by mountains. So they went, leaving behind crosses / of thornwood, and the traces of campfires. / It so happened, from time to time, that they had to winter in snowy passes / and draw lots, and boil the bones of their comrades. / So, after this, the hot valley, where indigo could be grown / seemed beautiful to them, and further, in the twisting mists / crawling into the shoreline grottos, / labored the ocean. (14-21)

Were they mistaken in their delight? Is the speaker suggesting here that he, not having undergone such a severe trial, is able to pass judgment on the West Coast more subjectively and unlike Rio Preisner, for example, who, more similar to these earliest Californians, paid homage to his adopted country as a salvific plank from the shipwreck of twentieth century Europe?<sup>10</sup> No, California, as strange and foreign as it may seem to him at times, is never rejected outright as a negative phenomenon. He often sees it rather as something of a promised land *in potentia*, happened across rather than sought, yet to be engaged nonetheless. What other real choice does he, do they, have, but to allow this new world to become part of them, through osmosis?

Sleep, and the peninsulas and cliffs will gather together within you, falling in place, / the war councils of the immobile animals in the wilds, / he basilicas of reptiles, the foaming white. / Sleep on your overcoat, while the horse browses the grass, / and the eagle takes down the measures of the abyss. (22-26)

Still and all, temporal *wyobcowanie* enters here, settling down over the spatial dislocation like one photographic negative placed over another, to use Tadeusz Kantor’s brilliant metaphor of memory, to combine in the

complicated image of the person when examined, as they must be, together:

Upon waking, you will have your four corners of the world. / The west, an empty conch of water and air. / The east, always behind you, the null and void memory of the snow-covered fir. / And only, in the extension of arms spread wide, / the brassy grass, north and south. // We are people impoverished, tested. / We have camped out beneath different stars. / There, where you can draw a cup of water from a murky river, / and cut a slice of bread with your penknife, / is the place accepted, not chosen. / We did remember that where we are from are streets and houses, / So here too there had to be houses, the saddler's signboard, / the little gallery and chairs. But the deaf spaces, / the thunderbolt passing beneath the wrinkled skin of the earth, / the tide and the patrol of pelicans annihilated us. / Just like an arrowhead uncovered in the clay of grottos of extinct tribes / living on reptiles and acorn flour / there was a vase, brought here from a distant sea. (27-44)

The place is “accepted, not chosen.” This wanderer is something of a modern-day Aeneas, *fata profugus*, who *non sponte sua Californiam sequitur*, yet who accepts his new territory, conscious of the fact that the resulting culture, in this case, of course, his personal culture, will be an amalgamation of what is brought from the shores of another sea and what has been found here, proper and native to the rocky western edge of the American continent. In the poems of *Czarnodziejska góra* [*Magic Mountain*], written about this same time but published in the eighties, Miłosz's narrators express the first impressions of the “peak” in Berkeley to which the poet has been exiled; the description of the same, from the mouth of another European, is of its foreignness: “He said that it's difficult to get used to at the start / For here there is no spring and summer, nor fall and winter” (“Czarnodziejska góra,” 4-5). And thus, even the behavior of Nature seems senseless. Toward the end of the same poem we read:

Scorching October, cool July, in February the trees are in blossom. / The mating dances of hummingbirds are *not* a sign of coming spring. / Only the faithful maple casts off his leaves, needlessly, / because such was the manner of his ancestors. (15-18)

The speaker here is just like that maple tree. Unable to change, confirmed in topographically senseless activities, because “such was the manner of his ancestors.” Yet the very next poem in this collection, “Widok” [“View”], dated 1975, ends with an expression of the very same

acceptance of the new situation that we have been talking about. Longed-for Europe has passed away. What remains is naked reality:

This landscape was lacking nothing but illumination, glorification. / Royal deputies, who would come bearing gifts /... *however* / there the castle halls have fallen low, / along with the little streets behind the cathedral, the tiny warehouses, stores. / And no one from among the people remains. So who would there be to send the deputation? / After unknown catastrophes I have inherited a land / stretching to the very shore of the sea, and above the land, the sun. (1-2;13-17)

Similarly, on “Page 13” of *Osobny zeszyt: Przez galerie luster* [*Separate Notebook: Through the Galleries of Mirrors*, (dated 1977-1979 and published in the early eighties)], the narrator expresses a rejection of California, followed immediately by an acceptance of his fate:

I didn’t choose California. It was given me. What does an inhabitant of the northern climes have in common with the baked and cracked wilderness? Grey mud, the dry beds of streams, hillocks the color of straw and groupings of cliff like jurassic reptiles: such is for me the spirit of this area /.../ Where was it declared, that we are owed a land, like a bride? / To submerge ourselves in her harms, deep and pure / and swim there, borne on by fecund currents? (1-6; 10-12)

Returning to “Była zima”: exiled from Poland, Miłosz’s speaker understands, in this poem at least, that he is undergoing both a diminution of his person (the foreigner among natives) and an expansion of his person (the enforced expansion of his personal culture through the infusion of new experience).<sup>11</sup>

And so I go about here, along the eternal land, / tiny, helping myself along with a little cane. / I pass the volcanic park and lay down by the spring, / knowing not how to express that which is, always and everywhere: / Under my breasts and belly is she, so really existing, / that I am grateful for each of her pebbles. / I press myself against her. Is it my pulse, or hers that I hear? / But, invisible, above me move about the hems of silk dresses, / hands, wherever they were, touch my shoulder. / Or the small laughter, once, at wine, / beneath the lanterns in the magnolias, for large, large is my house. (45-55)

Our comparison of Miłosz’s narrator and Virgil’s hero is a risky one. It is not a perfect fit, on several levels. First of all, as we have mentioned before, Miłosz’s irrelevance—despite the undoubted and deep influence he had on his American students and the anglophone poets who learned

from and translated with him—is due to the fact of his being completely disengaged from any such meaningful influence on the development of his new country's culture, such as he would have wielded had he remained in Poland.<sup>12</sup> In this case, except for isolated archipelagos (to use a metaphor from his elegant English translation of Zbigniew Herbert's poem "The Lament of Fortinbras") of the Poles who continued to read him and the students and peers with whom he interacted, Miłosz was to remain "tiny." Second, and more important, whereas Aeneas was actually leading the Trojans home by journeying to the shores of divinely-predestined Italy, from whence in ancient times the protoplast of the Trojan nation had set out to found his new city by the river Skamander, Miłosz finds himself inserted into a world that he had nothing in common with previous to his exile; indeed, as we have seen, into a culture that he held in despite. Feelings of loneliness occur in the California poems with greater frequency than any optimism of future amalgamation. In "Miasto bez imienia" ["City without a Name"], which perhaps not coincidentally has a strong flavor of the despairing portions of Eliot's *Waste Land*, we may read:

In Death Valley I thought of how women pin their hair. Of a hand sweeping the student's ball with a searchlight, in a city from which no voice reaches me now. The minerals beneath my wheels play no call to judgment. They spill about with the crunching hiss of lava pellets. In Death Valley, the salt sparkles on the bed of the dry lake. Watch out, watch out, whispers the pulse of my blood. Vain to look for wisdom from these solid cliffs. In Death Valley, no eagle, no hawk in the sky. The gypsy's predictions have come true. In the alleyway beneath the arcades I was reading at the time a poem about someone, who lived practically next door, entitled *An Hour of Thought*.<sup>13</sup> I stared long at the mirror. In it, every three hundred miles or so I saw a man walking: an Indian pushing a bicycle up hill. (2)

It is not difficult to sense his closeness to the Lithuanian gypsy, the proximity of the one who long ago foretold his exile, and whom he keeps always with him in his memory, in contrast to his living neighbor, the Native American, whom he rushes past and watches as he grows smaller and smaller in the rear-view mirror. For, unlike Aeneas and his Trojans, Miłosz does not accept Juno's compromise of Trojan ascendancy in the Rome-about-to-be; he does not agree to forego his Trojan customs and language in vital submersion to the Latin autochthones.<sup>14</sup> Miłosz, unlike Aeneas, remains stubbornly faithful to his "Greek" dialect, and is constantly looking over his shoulder, across the ocean, towards his Troy.



Yet he has more in common with that Indian than he at first lets on. Miłosz's Troy, although perhaps not literally destroyed as was that of Aeneas, belongs to the past; it is as unreachable as the city of Priam beneath the Turkish soil of Hisarlik. In verse 12 of "Miasto bez imienia" we read:

Why is it only me to whom a defenseless city, clean as the wedding necklace of a forgotten tribe, is entrusted? // Like the blue and ruddy grains threaded in Tuzigoot on the coppery desert seven-odd centuries ago. // Where the ocher, crushed into powder on the stone, yet awaits cheek and brow—but there has been no one there for ages. (12: 1-6)

Miłosz's Wilno is little different from the deserted pueblo near Cottonwood, Arizona, that he gazes upon. The persons he has converse with are no more substantial than the ghost of Hector appearing in dream to Aeneas:<sup>15</sup>

Maybe Anna and Dorcia Drużyno conjured me from this three hundredth mile marker in Arizona, for no one but me already remembers, that they once lived? // And they walk before me along Nadbrzeżną, two parrots, noblewomen from Żmudź, undoing for me the grey buns of old women's hair, at night? // Here there is no earlier or later, all seasons of the day and the year endure simultaneously. // At dawn, in long lines, the manure dealers ride their wagons and at the crossroads magistrates collect the turnpike tolls in leather pouches.<sup>16</sup> (12: 11-18)

In *Gdzie wschodzi słońce i kędy zapada*, Miłosz will tacitly make the identification himself. Bending over a flower on the banks of the Rogue River in Oregon, and musing over the transmutation of the river's name from the French *Rivière des Coquins* through the English Rogue River to his own Polish coinage *Rzeka Hułtajaska*, his speaker notes:

I sat by her current loud and frothy, / tossing stones, and thinking that whatever name / that flower bore in the language of the Indians will never be known, / just as the native name of their river will never be known. / There ought to be a word enclosed in every thing. / But that's not how it is. And so what good is my vocation. (2: 94-99)

This intimation of senselessness, this growing doubt in the permanence of speech, of his bardic calling, so at odds with the position he arrived at, following the war, of his responsibility as poet, brings the earlier section of this cycle to a close:

Was I there, curled like the fruit of the plant in the seed, / already called, even before the hours should touch me, one after the other? / Does that little remain of work until evening, / that I have nothing except my fulfilled destiny? // Beneath the dark blue cloud, with its glint of a roan horse / what has been, I recognize unclearly. / The rags of my name fall away from me / and the stars in the waters grow small. / Again, that unnamed one speaks for me, / and opens the disappearing, sleepy houses, / so that I might write in the deserts here, / beyond sea and land. (I, Chorus 2: 15-26)

Now it is *his* name that is disappearing, and an “unnamed one” speaks on his behalf. More than once this idea of “someone else” speaking inside him, driving him to speech despite his sense of the absurdity of trying to communicate in and from his isolation, arises in Miłosz's California poems. It seems as if this painful impulse, warring against just as painful a sense of apathy, can be directly attributed to the loneliness of exile, in which, as his narrator puts it in verse eight of “Miasta bez imienia,” “angelic choirs fly by in the seed of a pomegranate / not for us do they play every now and then on their trumpets,” 7-8, and which drives him to the nadir of hopelessness and doubt in his very existence. See, for example, verse seven of the same cycle, the meter and form of which eloquently recall the penitential hymns *Stabat mater* and *Dies irae*:

When I got rid of my sorrow / and the praise, which I chased / of him, who I never became. // [...] // Well, right. I wanted to be myself, / raising a toast to the mirror, I wept, / in this way I came to know my stupidity. // Of fingernail and mucous membrane, / intestine, lung and spleen, / whose home will be fashioned? // One's own, and one of many / I have no friend in myself / as time splits me in two. // Snow-covered monuments, / may my offering be accepted, / I have wandered, I know not whence. (1-3; 7-18)

The confusion expressed in these lines is fortified even further by the strong half rhyme of “when” [*kiedy*] with which the sequence begins, and “whence” [*kędy*], with which it concludes.

Speaking of motion—having arrived at the Pacific Ocean, the furthest limit of the West, beyond which begins the even more unfamiliar Orient, Miłosz present us with an exhausted persona. His narrator in “Słowa” [“Words”] has arrived at a self-confessed apathy:

Let us take note, that he nourished within himself a sort of indifference. / He liked to drink and gossip, but when the snobbish ladies / scolded him for not sending anything to the publishers, he laughed. / He preferred these

shores, because primordial violence / is sufficient unto itself and the barking of seals / is that, which it is. (5-10)

There is, of course, more than one way to read lines such as these. There is a mysticism in his delight in the dramatic, legible cliffs of the Pacific shoreline and the honest barking of the seals that is familiar to us from his early, almost pantheistic verses; it is an experience he will devote an entire poem to a decade and a half later, in “Stan poetycki,” from *Ciemne i zakryte* [*Dark and Hidden*], one of the post-1980 collections we will speak of in the next chapter:

It was as if instead of eyes he was mounted with backwards binoculars, making distant the world and everything: people, trees, streets, all grow small but nothing at all loses definition, but rather thickens. // Earlier I had such moments during the composition of verse, so I know distance well, disinterested contemplation, the adoption of an “I” which is “not-I,” but now this is a constant phenomenon and I ask myself what it means—have I perhaps entered into a continuous poetic state. // Things which were once difficult are easy now, but I don’t feel a strong need to transfer them to paper. (1-9)

But he is the one who introduces the theme of indifference here, and thus we continue with the theme of cultural exhaustion. Yet this apathy or indifference is not so much despair as it is a longing for a return to the *tabula rasa*, a re-beginning. Returning to “Słowa,” we read:

Life deals death, / the billowing wave crashes apart in foam. How many fewer illusions. / It was like in the far off, very far off land / of his childhood, when he as yet did not know / that there were some people out there striving to rescue their “ego,” / adding word to word at night in the candlelight. (10-15)

In this verse, the expansion of the poetic self (forged, or at least emphasized, by the creative act of putting pen to paper, as the “snobs” urge him to do) into the larger *ego* of participation in, identification with, the perceived reality, described as the nirvanic “poetic state” of the later verse, is identified with the pure state of childhood. There, one participates in, approaches, nature with the same honesty as the seals and otters in the California surf, compared with which the fevered nighttime labors of the poets in lines 14-15 are laughable, pitiable, of indifferent worth.

But that is who he is, nonetheless. Like it or not, Miłosz’s narrator finds himself among the number of those attempting to “rescue their own ego” pen in hand. Nor can one live in the past; the continuing foreignness

of California does not only impose upon the poet an imperative of reflection upon his lost past. It also affords him the luxury of considering new beginnings, a theme expressed forcefully in the many narratological situations set in the morning. He “hones down morning thoughts,” he stands in the dawn and ponders the rising sun. Perhaps today will be the day he begins his march toward a (new) sense and a (new) order? For, looking backwards as he does in the final lines of “Na trąbach i na cytrze” [“On Trumpets and Zither”], he sees only confusion. Even the little he had, to use an evangelical metaphor, has been taken away from him, as the past he knew so well now seems to mean something different, and his own deeds in the past feeble, if not meaningless:

I wanted to be a judge, but those, whom I called “them,” were transformed into me. // I cast aside my faith, so as not to be better than men and women who were only certain of their ignorance. // And on the roads of my earthly fatherland spinning about with the music of the spheres I thought, that everything that I might accomplish, will someday be done better. (11: 13-19)

The narrator of the California poems is, in a certain sense, ill. In “Dużo śpię” [“I Sleep a Lot”], which begins with him facing that Orient, helpless in his new, unfamiliar surroundings, he continues the above sense of dislocation in sarcastic lines on the newly-discovered irrelevance of European authorities;

I sleep a lot and read Thomas of Aquinas / or *The Death of God*, (such a Protestant work). / To the right, the bay, as if poured of tin, / beyond that bay the city, beyond the city the ocean, / beyond the ocean more ocean, until you reach Japan. / To the left dry hills with white grass, / beyond the hills the watered valley, where rice is grown, / beyond the valley mountains and Ponderosa pine, / beyond the mountains deserts and sheep. (1-9)

“Between,” hemmed in, surrounded, he turns to a doctor for help:

Doctor, I'm hurting. / Not here. No, not here. I don't know where, any more. / Maybe it's from a surfeit of islands and continents, / unspoken words, bazaars and wooden flutes / or drinking before the mirror, without beauty, / although one was supposed to be something along the line of an archangel / or St. George from the St. George Prospekt. (14-20)

Yet as soon as the words leave his mouth, he understands where his disease, his unease, is located: in the spirit. And so he turns from the man

of science, who considers body and mind from a mechanistic perspective, to the *znachor*,<sup>17</sup> who practices healing without a diploma, yet whose therapy is based on a spiritual perspective in which Christianity is mixed with the leftovers of pagan spellcasting:

Shaman, I'm hurting. / I always have believed in spells and superstition. / Naturally, women have only one, Catholic, soul, / but we have two. When you dance, / in dream you visit the distant pueblos / and even lands unseen. / Put on, I beg you, your feathered amulets, / you need to save one of your own. / I have read many books, but I don't believe them. / When something hurts us, we return to the banks of a certain river. / I remember those crosses with the signs of sun and moon / and the spellcasters, how they worked, during the typhus epidemic. / Send your soul beyond the mountains, beyond time. / Tell me what you saw there. I'll be waiting. (21-34)

In one important sense, this is Miłosz's first truly émigré poem. For in it, his narrator identifies himself, not as a Pole or a European, but as one of a small tribe of "select" souls, who may be found in Eastern Europe *and* among the tribes of the American continent, whose homeland is not to be found on this earth. He pleads, "it's time for you to help one of your own." This confession, if we may call it such, to a narrow group of the mystical elect, smells strongly of gnosticism. And thus, before we continue with our commentary on these lines, we should take a quick look at a verse written five years later (in 1967), entitled "Zapisane wczesnym rankiem" ["Written Down in the Early Morning"]. The poem describes a surprising bibliophilic find in Cody's Bookshop on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley, "There, were pretty girls walk about barefoot, / and the longhaired, bearded youths tie a kerchief around their brows, / after the manner of the Redskins," 1-3) in that paradoxical age when traditional Christianity is rejected by so many—because of the Church's perceived support of America's war in Vietnam? —

In that day and age, when from the bay, brilliant with sun up to the very Golden Gate, there set out, every day, ships laden with soldiers and substances that set people afire, (5-10)

yet one may still come across psychedelic posters with the prayer that the "Baby Jesus shut your mouth and open your mind," Miłosz's narrative persona unexpectedly finds a book by Ben Shahn, his near-neighbor from Kowno, Lithuania. He is fascinated by the text, which is a translation of some gnosticizing mystical theory of painting by Maximus of Tyre. A portion of Shahn's text is translated into Polish in the poem:

Let people know, / what is divine, / act so that / they should know: / that's all. / If God / is made present in the mind / of a Greek by the art of Phidias, / of an Egyptian / through his praise / of animals, / of another person / by a river, / and of still another / by fire, / I am not angered / by the discrepancies between them, / as long as they know, / as long as they love, / as long as they remember. (96-115)

This little excursion into syncretism ends with:

Someone is sure to wonder whether this is a poem, or prose, and for what reason Miłosz offers the coincidental to print. // I however would prefer to finally be beyond poetry and prose, beyond intention and justification. (116-119)

He'd like to "be beyond verse and prose, beyond intention and justification;" in other words, at the *tabula rasa* stage, at the start(again) line. The paradox in all of this is, as these two poems point out, he has already "started." There will be poems yet, like "Jak było" ["How it was"], written a year later, when the sudden glimpse of a hippie camp in which new-age idols are feted in the smoke rising from cannabis pipes, when he will identify himself with his old, rejected Christian culture: "And those who longed for the Kingdom, like me grew wild in the mountains, the descendants of a shamed myth," 32-33].<sup>18</sup> And here we meet again that Jaded Christ of prewar Warsaw:

God the Father did not walk about, checking in on the offshoots of cedar; His great breathing was never heard again. // His Son never knew His sonship and turned away His eyes, passing by the neon cross, flat as a strip-tease screen. // This time, it truly was all over for the Old and New Testaments. (16-20)

But here we see Miłosz's persona unable to remain in that state of primitive exaltation for long, where, as he puts it in "I recline on many shores simultaneously, my cheek to the sand / and hear, how beating ecstatic drums, surges close that same / ocean," 2: 15-17. He is compelled to make sense, spiritual sense, of the his new situation, and this is a dangerous thing for a lonely man to attempt on his own. In "Dużo śpieć," we find him searching for a shaman. Whether or not he finds one in Ben Shahn and Maximus of Tyre in "Zapisane wczesnym rankiem," he attempts to contact or confect a new mysticism, a new metaphysical sense. And that can only be a step backward. How is he better than those new hippies with their "Wheel of Eternal Return carved out of black wood /which/ stood / in front of the tents of the itinerant orders" ("Jak było," 30-

31)? For it is a sharp turn towards the gnosticism, the dualism, the Manicheism which will color Miłosz's other writings (such as *Visions from the San Francisco Bay*) and cause so many eyebrows to raise in wonder around the time of his death, when his "orthodox" letter to the Pope is made public.

His flirt with gnosis can be seen as early as "Sentencje" ["Sentences"], dated Berkeley 1963/1965, in which he gives a nod both to the gnostic idea of the pre-existence of the soul and to the Manichean doctrine of birth and life as sorrow, punishment, the imprisonment of the "good" spirit in "evil" matter:

And yet it is a grave responsibility to coax souls / from thence, where they had lived together with the idea of hummingbird and chair, and star. / And imprison them in either-or: male gender, female gender, / so that they should awaken with tears in the blood of birthing. (18-21)<sup>19</sup>

It will come to fruition with these surprising lines from "Dzwony w zimie" ["Bells in Winter"], from *Gdzie wschodzi słońce, i kędy zapada* (1974):

It would seem that there should be no reason, / since I have driven off on a journey considerably longer / than any road through mountains and forest, / for me to remember, here, that room. // However, I belong to those who believe in *apokatastasis*. / That word promises backward movement, / not such as was petrified in *katastasis*, / and appears in the Acts of the Apostles, 3:21. // It means: return, restoration. St. Gregory of Nyssa believed in it, / as did Johannes Scotus Eriugena, Ruysbroeck and William Blake. // Therefore, every thing, for me, has a double life. / Both in time, and when time will be no more. (65-76)

A fairly confusing bit, this. Nathan and Quinn win the prize for the understatement of the week with their careful comment, "rejection of the *katastasis* of Acts suggests that this tradition might not be altogether orthodox."<sup>20</sup> The word *apokatastasis* does appear in Acts 3:21, in the context of the Second Coming of Christ. But this *apokatastasis panton* or "restitution of all things," as the Douai version translates it, cannot be divorced from that context, as it is here. And that context is St. Peter's preaching to the Jews following the Resurrection of Christ; in it, he calls for an acknowledgement of their having sinned, a change of heart, and an acceptance of Christ's grace, which will lead to the "restitution" of human nature. For, as the passage continues, Peter identifies Christ as the "prophet" spoken of by Moses: "For Moses said: A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me: him you shall

hear according to all things whatsoever he shall speak to you" (3:22). Then, he immediately proceeds to outline the human response required of them in order to affect this *apokatastasis*: "And it shall be, that every soul which will not hear that prophet, shall be destroyed from among the people" (3:24). Thus, the "restitution" is not an across-the-board promise, but a conditional promise, hinging on a) a faithful acceptance of the grace of Christ, and b) an active change in one's behavior, from bad to good, to put it plainly, from infidelity to faith. Peter goes on to remind the Jews that they are the nation of prophets, the nation to whom the prophets spoke, and the nation to whom God first offered his New Covenant, ending with: "To you first God, raising up his Son, hath sent him to bless you; that every one may convert himself from his wickedness" (3:26). In this final verse of the chapter, we see the matter of evangelical *apokatastasis* put in the clearest light possible. The first clause tells us that Christ's resurrection is intended as a blessing, a renewal. The second clause, which cannot be separated from the first, reminds us that His resurrection is a challenge, and that our renewal, our "restitution," depends entirely on our active response to that challenge.<sup>21</sup>

Is that what Miłosz's speaker has in mind? Despite his citation of chapter and verse, it would seem not. His "belief" in *apokatastasis*, which he groups together with the widely divergent theologies of St. Gregory of Nyssa and William Blake (!)<sup>22</sup> is expressed in an *unconditional* manner: God is going to renew all things. Not only is the condition of metanoia, of proper human response, missing from his formula, but so is the Christian superstructure: the all-important idea of restitution coming through, and by, and because of Jesus Christ.

At this point, it is worthwhile to consider Jarosław Anders' interesting assessment of Miłosz's prose work, *The Land of Ulro*:

In *The Land of Ulro* [...] he describes how nondenominational mysticism drew liberally from the traditions of Christian Gnosticism, Jewish Cabala, and the occult, and how after the seeming defeats of organized religion a "second line of defense" was being formed by such visionary thinkers as Emanuel Swedenborg, Blake, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.<sup>23</sup>

This perceptive assessment highlights an important characteristic of Miłosz's philosophy that we will come across again. Not only is his theological/philosophical thought "militant," but it is generally reactionary. He is not so much about asserting a truth, a creed, as he is about pushing back against assertions he finds inimical. In this case, he is holding the line against the cold "scientific imagination." In other places (in many places), he will be reacting against the claims of totalitarian authority.



And finally, when the totalitarian régimes oppressing his part of the world disappear, he himself will turn against organized religion—just to keep on fighting, as he knows no other way.<sup>24</sup>

To return to the poem at hand, *apokatastasis*, in the sense that it is used in the poems of Miłosz, refers rather to the heretical doctrine put forth by the early Christian thinker Origen, which would posit God setting a limit to suffering, even of the damned, even of the devil. If this were true—and St. Augustine sees in this the overthrow of the entire Christian truth in his discussion of Christ's words on the eternal significance of the day of judgment<sup>25</sup>—the entire, eternal reality of right and wrong, all morals, would be overturned. What is the sense of doing good, if those who do evil, often to better advantage, will be rewarded in the end, anyhow?

In lines 12-27 of this same poem, Miłosz has his narrator come into mystical communication with a young man from Corinth, whom St. Paul excommunicated<sup>26</sup> for incest. Yet *apokatastasis*, it seems, is the essence of God's mercy, for it turns out that Paul is wrong:

Me the severe Paul thundered against in Corinth / because I took my father's wife as my own. / For this, he forbade me access for all times / to the Supper at which they meet in brotherhood. / From that time, I was absent from the assembly of the saints / and sinful love led me on for years / to a poor puppet given over to temptation, / so that the eternal reprobation would be fulfilled. / Yet my Lord and my God, Whom I did not know, / tore me from the dust by a lightning bolt. / Your truths mean nothing to Him. / He has mercy upon all flesh. (16-27)

While it is true that in this same first letter to the Corinthians Paul holds out the possibility of the boy's eventual salvation ("deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh," he exhorts the church in verse 5, "that the spirit may be saved in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ") the *sine qua non* of that salvation, repentance (to say nothing of re-admission to communion with the Church), is completely passed by in Miłosz's poem. Leonard Nathan and Arthur Quinn speak to this very point in their discussion of the poem. They do their best to walk the critical tightrope stretched between author and narrator, setting the boy's words in the context of a vision occurring to the narrator while on a lonely mission "for the church,"

But there is something wrong with the telling. For one thing, the young man in the vision is saved despite the evil he does, as if human conduct in the world means nothing. And the vision seems to be reserved for the few, not something to be shared with the poor and humble. The telling itself is

clearly allegorical—the errand through the mountains for the church, the solitary dream-vision. This all, in fact, smacks of gnostic practice, another seduction of Manicheanism.<sup>27</sup>

In this retelling of the Biblical event, “severe Paul” is castigated for his puritanical lawgiving, Christian moral strictures are shown to be irrelevant, and God’s immense mercy is subjected here to the poet’s desire to return to the aforementioned state “beyond verse and prose, beyond intention and justification,” and leads him, along with that glamorous modern gnostic Friedrich Nietzsche, *beyond good and evil*.

Not entirely, of course. Or, at least, not entirely by the poet’s own fault. We have seen that western civilization, in so great a measure the product of Christianity, is, from Miłosz’s perspective, bankrupt. As he phrases it with bitter irony in the poem “Oskarżyciel” [“The Accuser”], section six in the cycle “Gdzie wschodzi słońce, i kędy zapada,”

O sure, I shall not all die. There will remain after me / a note in the  
fourteenth volume of the encyclopedia, / among hundreds of Millers, and  
Mickey Mouse.<sup>28</sup> (13-15)

Although one might well ask why the poet should be loath to have his name listed along those of Messrs Miller, the reference to Mickey Mouse is transparent. Now, the bankruptcy of Western culture, symbolized by the eternal adolescence of today’s “grown-ups” proudly “going to Disneyland!” is to a large extent a symptom of the absence of God in the modern world. In “Na brzegu” [“On the Shore,” from *Miasto bez imienia*, 1967], we read:

Inadequate being has weakened, neither I, nor she, nor he; neither man, nor  
woman: nothing but nakedness, nothing mine, ours. // Only the death-  
bearing ocean falling backwards on the sands and beneath the fire in the  
zenith, a witnessed illusion. // Just as then, when far beyond the echo, the  
town is transformed into a high cloud, and lips nearing lips over wine do  
not hesitate. // And although God should weep over the loss of every  
substance, He too is indifferent, for there has been no diminishment. (3-10)

In poems such as this, where “God” appears, or His “absence” is hinted at, it is not so much a confession on the narrator’s part to the “death of God,” as it is a comment upon His place in modern civilization, which can, or will, have nothing to do with Him. “Kronika” [“Chronicle”], dated St. Paul-de-Vence, 1967, displays contemporary society (even in his beloved Europe) to be simply inept in the face of the great mysteria of faith:

And also the lovelies pissing without bending their knees, immobile, in long skirts. // The clatter of wooden wheels, parade grounds near misty cranes engendered by us. // And states, from the drunken castle with the leaning tower up past the brook and chicken-coop fence. // That it should endure, and hurt, they carved the mouths of gods similar to us from the best wood. // Silver hearts, silver *miraglos* they hung up on cross-roads, sounding bells. // But immediately a cloud covered us, and passed, and down below there, it was quiet. // Nothing, only flashes in the abyss, once, one spring or summer. // Along the beach beyond the highway, supporting himself with a cane, in the hat of a summer beekeeper, // it so happens that one of us passes, gazing at their nudity. Heh Heh. (3-16)

Curiously enough, after this rant at a confused culture, as we read in the very next poem in this collection (one more direct address to that jaded Christ of Warsaw) it seems as if men were never very good at it anyway:

How could you stand it, Jesus, all those portable altars, / the silks, that their eyes burn holes through, weeping, seeking aid, / the silver and gold tin medals, before which they light their candles, / the marbles worn into troughs by centuries of knees? // [...] // What were they to you, Jesus, loins extracted from an urn, / on the straw of narrow beds above the mud of a dirt floor, / at the time when the frigid star flashes beyond the windowpane / and united are deep sleep and conception? // What a well of squalling, rascality and thin pipes! / What a tower of laments tossed aloft! / And who, with the clamor of bells, the sun of the sacraments / dare pass between them and You? (1-4; 9-16)

It should come as no surprise to us, then, to see in Miłosz's narrators devotees of the Inner Light; honest Christians hungering after the direct contact with God, which the modern world shuns, and which the Church—as he seems to suggest here—frustrates with its ceremonial bridges and even sacraments.<sup>29</sup> The traditional Catholic poet, be he Hopkins, Garneau, Eliot, Zahradníček or Preisner, will find that direct contact *in* the sacraments, especially the Sacrament of the Altar. However mistaken Miłosz's speaker may seem here, though, his intent is pure, his desire unfeigned. In a paradoxical way that is perhaps not completely foreign to Hopkins or St. John of the Cross, it is God's very absence which emphasizes His reality, and endorses the search as not in the least pointless. In *Miasto bez imienia* we find the 1962 verse “Im więcej” [“The more...”]:

The more you are despised every day, / the sillier the crowns they set upon your brows / crying in mockery: “show us your strength,” / [...] / the bigger the sorrow, mockery, anger, accusation, / because your word does

not move a stone from its place, / the more certain I can be of this one thing: / that you are, truly, the Alpha and the Omega. (1-3;5-8)

Both here, where His persecutors mock Him with “laughable crowns,” and there, where the traditional devotees of a physical Catholicism shroud the images of Christ with costly silks and gem-studded ornaments, Miłosz’s narrator aches to see God denuded of human conceptions, wishes like Thomas to have the robes of Christ parted in order for him to directly touch the flesh of God. It is his *via negativa*; truly paradoxical for a Catholic, who potentially has daily physical access to God, but for the exiled Miłosz, how logical. For as he as been deprived of familiar boundaries, is it any wonder that he would like to approach a similarly “exiled” God, stripped of all the cultural overlays of national and ethnic tradition, and thus, conversely, to see his own dislocation in terms of a liberating elevation to a more elemental, universal, state?

Now, whereas the speaker himself, despite his above-cited distaste for folk expressions of religiosity, begs God for a visible sign in the poem “Veni Creator,”

Come, Holy Ghost, / bending (or not bending) the grass, / showing yourself (or not) as a tongue of fire above the brow, / [...] / in the valley of walnut groves, or when the snows / bend down the dwarf firs on the Sierra Nevada. / I am only a man, so I need visible signs, / [...] / More than once have I begged, you yourself know it, for a statue in church / to lift its hand for me, one time only, only once. / But I understand that signs can only be human. / So raise up one man, wherever on earth / (but not me, because I know what’s decent), / and allow me, gazing at him, to stand in awe before You, (1-3; 5-7; 9-14)

his inner conviction of God’s existence, of the necessity of God’s existence, seems to be at the very marrow of his being. The verse on an infuriating lecture by an “extraordinarily intelligent” structuralist, who holds a cigarette with “extraordinary intelligence” in his “French paws” ends with this fierce credo:

What can I do with my idiocy, against you, collector of frozen tears, or against the computers in Lawrence Laboratory? // I am laughable, just as then, when I was small and tried to defend the sacred groves or Mount Sinai or the Island of Patmos, not knowing what it is I am fighting for and why. // Because the other children skipped about me rhyming words, and one boy kept singing “mother-washrag,” “mother-washrag,” until suddenly I threw myself upon him, kicking and biting. (15-22)

It is the same, stubborn rejection of the possibility of an absurd, amoral world that we find in the eighth stanza of the earlier cycle “Po ziemi naszej:”

And if Pascal was not saved, / and those thin hands, in which they placed  
the crucifix, / and he, completely, like a dead swallow / turned into dust,  
beneath the buzzing of poison-blue flies? // And if all of them, kneeling  
with folded hands, / millions of them, billions of them, finished there,  
where their illusions ran out? // I will never agree to that, never. I will  
give them a crown. / The human mind is splendid, the mouth powerful, /  
and the call, the challenge so great, that Paradise *must* open to admit them.

It is the same conviction, despite his confession to *apokatastasis*, with which he shows the inefficacy of the empty obsequies performed over the casket of a dead friend, consisting of a performance of Mozart—because no one knew what else to do:

Mozart resounded, unbound from his powdered wig, / and floated aloft  
with the dandelion puffs for a long while, / hovering overhead, in that  
vacuum along the path / of a jet airplane with its thin white smear. //  
Meanwhile he, contemporary to no man, / black as a caterpillar beneath the  
winter bark, / was at work, calling forth rusts and mould / to help him  
disappear, before they even could cart away the faded wreaths. (10: 9-16)

Line 13 calls to mind the last thoughts of Giordano Bruno on the pyre, in Miłosz’s telling, to whom the words of human tongues, once so familiar, had become completely foreign. Yet here it is not so much astonishment, as shame at the empty ritual (and his earlier, empty life?) which informs his sense of ultimate dislocation, and desire to “disappear” as quickly as possible. This experience of frantic self-disposal is contrasted with the life of a Lithuanian peasant girl, made wonderful by her acquiescence to Christ:

Paulina died long ago, and yet she still exists. / And I am somehow certain  
that she does, not only in my consciousness. // Above her severe face of a  
Lithuanian peasant / whirs a spindle of hummingbirds, and her flat tired  
feet / are splashed with sapphire water in which dolphins / bending their  
necks / dance. (11: 10-16)

Miłosz’s speaker will hold on tightly, despairingly tightly, to his faith. In the “Rozmowy na Wielkanoc 1620 r.” [“Conversations for Easter, 1620”], the narrative persona is split in two. A diabolical voice tempts a seventeenth-century nobleman, reminding him both of his sins and (when

that doesn't seem to work!) his reason, which should reject the fairy-tale of heaven. Nowhere else in Miłosz's work, and hardly anywhere else in the history of modern poetry, do we have such a powerful submission to the will of God as in the lines which read:

But just as God set me on the earth, / if He so wills, He can do it again.  
 /.../ If it's not fated to me, that He should rescue me, / still to the very end  
 will I praise Him. (31-32; 47-48)

It is the same determination found in the 1969 verse "O aniołach" ["On angels"]:

They say that someone thought you up, / but that does not convince me. /  
 Because people also thought themselves up. // The voice—that is perhaps a  
 proof, because it belongs to beings undoubtedly bright, / light, winged  
 (why on earth not?) / with stoles of lightning. // I have heard that voice in  
 dreams more than once / And, what is more strange, I more or less  
 understood / the command or challenge in the unearthly tongue: // it's  
 almost daylight / one more day / do what you can. (13-25)<sup>30</sup>

Neither Thomas Hardy nor Matthew Arnold could have written those lines, laboring, as they were, under the first *Blitzkrieg*-like onslaught of nineteenth-century materialistic science, which seemed to explode all non-empirical knowledge as myth. Miłosz, despite the more severe lessons of the bloody twentieth century—or perhaps, because of them—is able to look at such matters with a more impartial eye, and understand (again, in European history), that not all wisdom is, not all wisdom can be, arrived at through reason alone.

But nor is the sentiment expressed in "O aniołach" a Cartesian whim. We become fully human, separate from the rest of earthly creation, by our reason, our voice, our speech, which are such miracles that they must point to a divine wellspring. And it is this grounding in the sort of *real* proof he prays for in "Veni Creator" that urges the narrator, at the end of the poem, away from quietism and towards engagement in the real world; it is this that—if we take that letter for good coin—will eventually separate him entirely from the spiritualistic impulse of gnosticism,;and this, perhaps, is what won from John Paul II the guarded approbation of the poet's struggles. But that is still far in the future, and the tunnel will be long before any light appears.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> During his wild and eventful career, da Ponte was forced to flee creditors in London for the safe shores of America. He and his wife settled in the Central Pennsylvania town of Sunbury, where his sister-in-law ran a general store. In his *Memoirs*, da Ponte bitterly punned off the name of the town, saying that it was “fittingly named” as the place where the sun is buried.

<sup>2</sup> In a conversation with a Berkeley academic, who as a young professor in the History Department knew Miłosz, I was told that the poet felt isolated even from most people in the Slavic Department where he taught. My conversant reports that Miłosz would frequently end a spell of cultural or historical musing with “but my colleagues wouldn’t understand that.”

<sup>3</sup> Not to lump everyone into convenient ideological boxes, but it might be pertinent to point out here that, except for Camus, Miłosz was rejected by the leftist intellectual élite of France during his postwar exile in that country. These things should be taken into consideration when reading the otherwise interesting paper of Ewa Sławek, “Espace perdu et mémoire retrouvée dans la poésie de Czesław Miłosz,” in Hana Jechová and Héléne Włodarczyk, *Les effets de l’émigration et l’exil dans les cultures tchèque et polonaise* (Paris: Presses de l’université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1987), pp. 107-119. In it, making use of the philosophical ideas of Hegel and Derrida, she uses their concepts of “family” to underscore the violence of the separation felt by Miłosz due to his exile. However, it is not quite the case that Miłosz and Derrida belong to the same “European family” as she suggests. That is evident from the poem under consideration, and his later verse on hearing the elegant French philosopher lecture at Berkeley.

<sup>4</sup> The title of this poem is an ironic double entendre. It can mean “[we walk] over our land,” or in a geographical sense “all over our land,” as well as the despairing “it’s all over for our country.”

<sup>5</sup> For a good example of this, see Rio Preisner’s consideration of man in the face of overwhelming nature in *Americana*. It is not difficult to draw a line from the canvases of Caspar David Friedrich and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* to Preisner’s understanding of wild nature.

<sup>6</sup> Witold Gombrowicz, *Dziennik 1953-1956* [*Journals, 1953-1956*] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1986), p. 59. “One hundred years ago, a Lithuanian poet /Adam Mickiewicz/ forged the shape of the Polish spirit. Today, I, like Moses, am leading the Poles from their bondage to that form. I am leading the Poles out of their very selves.”

<sup>7</sup> Formally speaking, it is also eloquent that the De Sade verse is bookended by the poems on the Franciscan missions and Cabeza de Vaca’s epic of suffering.

<sup>8</sup> The Polish work *wtórzyć* can also mean “accompany,” in a musical sense. So the line has an untranslatable punning quality—Miłosz suggests that he is to accompany his words with the infant’s rattle.

<sup>9</sup> We are reminded again of Miłosz’s seeming inability to understand the eternal moment, as expressed in “Wychowanie katolickie.” Death is the great equalizer, temporally as well as morally. Those who died just now are the contemporaries of

the ancient defunct, who are no "deader" for having died centuries ago. Time is solely and uniquely the province of the living.

<sup>10</sup> See the forward to *Americana*: "America, the last superpower, to whom 'what is owed Caesar' is due for its humanistic political tradition, has become the 'saving shore' for whole generations of those shipwrecked and exiled by the storms of the modern age."

<sup>11</sup> This should be understood as a personal expansion, unlike that which I describe in "Exile as Implosion and Expansion: the Effect of American Banishment on the Poetry of Czesław Miłosz and Rio Preisner," given at the Rocky Mountain European Scholars Consortium at N.A.U. in Flagstaff in October, 2009 and published in *Connections* 2009. There, I suggest that Miłosz's visceral identification with Poland/Lithuania and the ensuing experience of being cut off during his Californian exile led to an "implosion" of his thought, an inward turning that aided on his fascination with gnosticism and hermeticism. Preisner, on the other hand, who was to remain in exile until his death, underwent an expansion of his poetic persona, from a purely Czech poet, to a poet who concerned himself with broader issues and a wider audience. This "expansion" in Preisner's case directly results from his conversion to Catholicism after the war. The conviction that he was, like all Christians, *homo viator*, whose fatherland is in heaven, freed him from the straitjacket of ethnicity so that the matter of his physical location on planet earth was completely irrelevant. We are about to explore the phenomenon of Miłosz's "turning inward" in the pages which follow.

<sup>12</sup> It is, of course, debatable to what extent Miłosz continued to be a culture-forming force in Poland after his political exile. A *persona non grata*, his works, published abroad and officially banned in Poland until the Nobel Prize in 1980 made it impossible for the government to ignore him, were hard to come by in his homeland, and passed from hand to élite hand. I will risk saying that his presence was more muted in the day to day life of poets in communist Poland than that of somewhat lesser, but home-published, poets such as Tadeusz Różewicz, Zbigniew Herbert, and even Jerzy Harasymowicz.

<sup>13</sup> *Godzina myśli*, by the Polish Romantic poet Juliusz Słowacki (1809-1849).

<sup>14</sup> Miłosz was obsessively, at times ironically, aware of his fierce fidelity to Polish. We have already seen this in "Władca Albanii," in "Hipoteza" ["Hypothesis"] one of the aphorisms from the collection "Zdania" ["Sentences," *Hymn o perle* / *Hymn of the Pearl*, 1982], he writes: "If, she said, you have written in Polish / in order to punish yourself for your sins, then you will be saved".

<sup>15</sup> Indeed the long, prosaic lines of these early California verses strike one as the diction of an exhausted, or dreaming man, in comparison with the strict syllabic meters and tight rhyme schemes that dominate his earlier verses, written in Europe before the war, and in Europe, Washington and New York just after the conclusion of World War II. To expand upon the "Pueblo Wilno" theme, consider lines 21-34 from "Bernardynka," which the poet was to publish in the 1987 volume *Kroniki*: "Hookey, to Bernardynka. Dates, to Bernardynka. How many butts knew those benches, how many touches, / how many shapes of breasts, which were somehow meaningful, after all, / to those students and girls, but now mean nothing at all. //



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Why I have this need for detail inside me, I can't understand. / Is it because the three crosses there have been demolished, that the name has been forbidden, / that Batory (University, named after King Stefan Batory) is unknown, even its very name? / That those, who walked about there, have lost / their materiality? / That I am the only one / who is able to transform the garden into words? / But for what? On what foundation? There is no foundation. / Like a spider I spin out my thread and travel over it, / I am lifted above the shining earth by the wind, / and along with me, the forms of vanished cities."

<sup>16</sup> "Here," in these lines is not the seemingly always sunny Southwest, but the eternal continuum of memory. On another note, in the case of the two girls (now old women, if still alive) who call to Miłosz's narrator perhaps only because they wish their existence to be noted by someone who can confirm their having lived, it is curious to compare this with the lines of another "imprisoned exile," the Ezra Pound of the Pisan DTC. His fascinating *Pisan Cantos*, written under the imminent threat of execution, are the most personal segment of his sprawling epic. It is possible that he gives rein to introspection for this very reason—the desire to confirm his having existed, before it is too late. But it is a reference to other prisoners there that jogs the memory here: "and now Richardson, Roy Richardson, / says he is different / will I mention his name?" Canto LXXXIV: 18-20.

<sup>17</sup> The term *znachor* is most frequently applied to village wisemen (or women) in Slavic culture. The fact that *this* *znachor* visits "distant pueblos" in his trances suggests a native American shaman. One is almost tempted to see in this an eloquent image of a slow transformation from European, to American poet.

<sup>18</sup> Yet even here the identification is far from univocal. Like the murder note in Marlowe's *Edward II*, much depends here on the placement of the comma. Should we read the line "And those who longed for the Kingdom, like me, grew wild in the mountains" [A którzy tęsknili do Królestwa, jak ja, dziczeli w górach] or "And those who longed for the Kingdom, like me grew wild in the mountains" [A którzy tęsknikli do Królestwa, jak ja dziczeli w górach]? We opt for the second reading, out of faithfulness to the Polish text, which does not include the comma following the pronoun *ja*. But the fact of Polish being an inflected language, which frees up word order in statements, actually does allow for the first reading we offer, in which Miłosz's narrator identifies himself with the Christians *in* their Christianity, and not solely in their exclusion from society, which the second English translation emphasizes.

<sup>19</sup> A thought already in his mind in the volume *Król Popiel*, but there placed in the mouth of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus: "Particular existence steals from us the light / (That sentence can be read backwards, as well as forwards)," "Heraklit," 14-15. In the same collection, his "Album snów" ["An Album of Dreams," dated California, 1961] reveals his joyful release from anxiety in the "dance of the happy Hasids," a dance he joyfully undertakes with two of his favorite heresiarchs, Walt Whitman and Emanuel Swedenborg (vide the "dream" dated December 3).

<sup>20</sup> See Leonard Nathan and Arthur Quinn, *The Poet's Work. An Introduction to Czesław Miłosz* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 109.

<sup>21</sup> The traditional Christian culture of Europe is one centered firmly on the foundation of free will, man's freely willed response to the offer extended him by God. The great Mexican poet Octavio Paz underscores this in his essay "Todos Santos día de muertos," in which he opposes the deterministic, Aztec understanding of the universe to the Christian tradition imported to these shores by the conquistadores: "El advenimiento del catolicismo modifica radicalmente esta situación. El sacrificio y la idea de salvación, que antes eran colectivos, se vuelven personales. La libertad se humaniza [...] La muerte de Cristo salva a cada hombre en particular. Cada uno de nosotros es el Hombre y en cada uno están depositadas las esperanzas y posibilidades de la especie. La redención es obra personal." See his *El labirinto de la soledad y otras obras* (New York: Penguin, 1997), pp. 77, 78. As we move through the American verses of Czesław Miłosz, we will have more than one occasion to consider his musings on determinism, which part company with the free agency of the traditional Judeo-Christian system.

<sup>22</sup> The task of defining just what sort of beliefs are enunciated by Czesław Miłosz in his poetry is made all the more difficult by the very subjective, quirky nature of his thought. For example, in writing of *apokatastasis* in Miłosz's poems, Aleksander Fiut states "the question of whether Miłosz believes that the *apokatastasis* will actually occur also seems irrelevant. Like Blake, he would no doubt answer that it is real because it has been imagined." By the same token, unicorns, the Land of Cockayne, and men with their faces beneath their shoulders have also been imagined at one time or another. The "reality" of such imaginings is only a fictional reality. They do not *actually* exist. To return to our religious / philosophical context, all theological "imaginings" cannot have the same "real" weight. Many are mutually exclusive. Arians, Unitarians and Latter Day Saints "imagine" Christ to be a created being. That imagining cannot be true, if it is true that He is the only-begotten Son of God, coeval with the Father, as orthodox Christians who assent to the Nicene Creed "imagine" Him to be. Only one of these "imaginings" can be really true. For the Fiut citation, see his *Eternal Moment*, p. 87.

<sup>23</sup> Anders, p. 76.

<sup>24</sup> Enlightening, in this regard, is what the critic Stanisław Balbus says about Miłosz's compositional anarchy: "From the very start, Miłosz aims at the destruction of systems *as systems*, that is, to the undermining of the systemic *bases* [*zasady*] of verse, which bind and constrict the aural material of speech. He strives to liberate this material in all of its richness, which does not submit to 'systematization.' He sets up, as 'versifier,' to work *beyond* systems, or within the areas of all of them simultaneously, as if ignoring the things that divide them." This position of being "against" and reacting to things is therefore something deeply set in the poet's makeup. Balbus is quoted by Stanisław Barańczak in "Tunel i lustro (Czesław Miłosz: 'Świty'" ["The Tunnel and the Mirror" (Czesław Miłosz's poem 'Świty,'" in *Tablica z Macondo* (London: Aneks, 1990), p. 20.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, *De Civitate Dei* 21, 23: "How can one think that eternal punishment will be by long-lasting, yet temporal, fire, while at the same time believing that life eternal is without end; since Christ, in the very same place,

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spoke of them both in a manner [*sententia*] which embraces both equally: "These will go into eternal punishment, while the just will enter into eternal life"? If both are eternal, it follows indeed that either both are to be estimated finite, if long-lasting [*cum fine diuturnum*] or endless, perpetual. They are related to each other as a pair of equals [*par pari relata sunt*]<sup>26</sup>—here eternal punishment, there eternal life. Therefore, to say that in this same sense eternal life will be endless, and eternal punishment finite, is terribly absurd." He is just as firm on this point in *Ad Orosium contra Priscillianistas et Origenistas*, C. 6, n. 7, where he bases his point on textual criticism: "In both places the Greek word *aionion* [endless, eternal] is used. Now if compassion inclines us to believe that the punishment of the impious will not be endless, why do we believe this about the reward of the just, since in both parts, in the same place, the same sentence, with the same word, eternity is announced?" A similar point is made by St Basil in his *Regulae brevius tractatae*, 267. Thus the orthodox position on the matter; in the New Testament, *katastasis* is used to refer to the Second Coming of Christ, and thus, we hazard (whatever William Blake has to say on the matter!) is the sense in which Gregory of Nyssa uses the term. Note that, in his poem, Miłosz expressly rejects *katastasis*.

<sup>26</sup> The situation fictionalized here is mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:1.

<sup>27</sup> Nathan and Quinn, p. 120.

<sup>28</sup> This blatant autobiographical reference, like his use of his own last name in the verse on Ben Shahn, are two of the strongest examples of Miłosz as self-revealing author. I point this out because, despite our most strenuous efforts to keep "narrator" separate from "author" in our criticism of his poetry, Miłosz's penchant for dropping the mask and blurring the distinction between the two personae makes it very difficult not to say "Miłosz states" or "Miłosz feels" in reference to the ideas presented in the poems. This will make our acceptance of the strategy of inner orthodoxy (what I write is not necessarily what I believe), claimed by the poet, very difficult to prove, let alone assent to.

<sup>29</sup> A distrust of expressions of folk piety can be found, somewhat ironically, to run throughout Miłosz's poetry. For an early example of this, see the first stanza of "Sprawca" ["Maker," though the Polish word can just as easily stand for "Culprit"] from *Poemat o czasie zastygłym* (1933), with its huffy reference to people falling on their faces, as if before a monstrosity.

<sup>30</sup> The theme was to be repeated in the 1986 verse "Moce" ["Powers"] from *Kroniki* [*Chronicles*, 1987]: "Weak of faith, yet I believe in the powers and dominions / of which each centimeter of air is full. / They watch us—is it possible, that no one should be watching us? / Just think: a cosmic spectacle, and absolutely no one? / There is proof for this: my consciousness,"<sup>1-5</sup>.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### BERKELEY AND STOCKHOLM

If alienation and an acute sense of separation characterize much of the early Californian verse of Czesław Miłosz, that was all to change in 1980. Whether or not the Nobel Prize in Literature came to him as a surprise, it did allow him to exist again in a way he hadn't since before the war. The notoriety that accompanied the Prize, both here and in Europe, put him back on the map. In his Nobel Lecture, delivered on December 8, 1980, he spoke of

choosing loneliness and giving oneself over to the strange practice of writing poetry in Polish, even though one lives in France or America; the pursuit of a certain ideal of the poet who, if he desires fame, that is to be famous only in his own little village or city.<sup>1</sup>

The award of the literary prize to an “American” poet moved the *New York Times* not only to report the fact from coast to coast, but also to include a list of Miłosz's works currently available in English translation. The awarding of the literary prize to a Polish poet forced the communist régime in his homeland to switch gears. One of the most painful challenges the exiled Miłosz had to face was his being cut off from a wide influence in his homeland, something which he would have enjoyed, at least to the extent it was enjoyed by Zbigniew Herbert, had he not emigrated.

Not that he was ever completely absent from the Polish cultural milieu “at home,” *w Kraju*, as one said at the time; Polish émigré publishing houses like the Instytut Literacki in Paris printed his works, and these were smuggled into Poland by countless brave souls. The *drugi obieg*, that is, the underground, opposition presses in Poland also brought out volumes of his poetry, at great personal risk. Gallantly, Miłosz paid tribute to these dedicated collaborators in his banquet speech of December 10, 1980, in which he notes:

Credit should be given to those of my colleagues who have not been swayed by absurd doctrines, and to the young who have promoted free

exchange of ideas, whether through lectures, periodicals, or books. Volumes of my poetry published by their independent presses are most precious items on my bookshelves. No lesser homage is due to the astonishing energy and perseverance of a few persons who founded abroad institutions dedicated to publishing books and periodicals in Polish, such as the Literary Institute in France.

Nonetheless, Miłosz's presence in communist Poland was restricted. His works were available, but only to such as had the need, the determination, and the knowledge of how to acquire them. With the awarding of the Nobel Prize, the inimical communist régime was faced with a dilemma: to continue the official repression of Miłosz's works, and run the high risk of appearing ludicrous in the eyes of the world, or to embrace the man looked upon by Poles and others as the most valuable expression of the modern Polish literary spirit, and run the risk of seeing his ideas contaminate wider circles of the restive populace?

They chose the latter option, as the lesser of two evils, and also, certainly, as a cynical example to which they could point in rebuttal of their critics who claimed that the totalitarian government of Poland repressed the speech of its adversaries.

At the start of the new decade, then, Miłosz's poetry began again to appear in editions published by state-run houses, especially the Wydawnictwo Literackie of Kraków. The officially sanctioned volumes appearing behind the iron curtain are largely identical with the western originals published in Paris. Some verses, even from the early volumes, were suppressed; about half of the *wiersze rozproszone* [uncollected poems] of 1932-1938<sup>2</sup> are not to be found in the first volume of *Wiersze* [Poems] published by the Kraków house in 1984; and in the case of "2 strofy" ["Two Strophes"], only the first of these poems is given, entitled "Strofa" ["Strophe"] without any editorial explanation.<sup>3</sup>

For one more example, a comparison of the 1988 version of *Nieobjęta ziemia* [*The Unattainable Earth*] published by the yet communist-controlled Wydawnictwo Literackie with the original text brought out in 1984 by the Instytut Literacki in Paris yields only one discrepancy. The ellipses found in the fourth section of "Świat i sprawiedliwość" ["The World and Righteousness"], found on p. 61 of the Kraków text (p. 63 of the Paris edition) indicate a censor's excision:

*"I could not have had a better life than the one I had," wrote Irena to me in February of 1983 from Warsaw, after having lived through the occupation of the country by (...) enemy armies, which forced her into hiding from the Gestapo, and then adapting to life under the communists.*

*She was also forced to witness terror, and workers' revolts in 1956, 1970, 1976, 1980, and the declaration of martial law in December, 1981.*

The missing word—the only word missing in the entire volume—is “dwie,” i.e. the number two. Although the censor, in this final year of the Polish People’s Republic, 1988, allowed the poet’s criticism of communism, and his bold equation of communist rule with terror, his open indictment of the official versions of history by underscoring the various workers’ uprisings against the government that claimed to be of them and for them, to pass, he couldn’t, or perhaps he wasn’t allowed to, pass the poet’s indictment of the Soviet Union and its co-occupation of Poland during World War II. It is still too early for the communists to speak of the Soviet invasion of eastern Poland on September 17, 1939, as anything other than the official and welcome exercise of the Red Army’s intervention in “chaotic” Poland in order to preserve the Ukrainian and Belorussian populations in the eastern marches. Therefore, the “occupying armies” can only be those of the Germans, perhaps including those of their allies, the Slovaks!

Still, what a bold and heady step this was, the wide dissemination of Miłosz’s works in his native Poland. Even if they were in a somewhat altered form, they constituted an implied confession of defeat on the part of the authorities: *We were wrong; the fellow we wrote off so long ago has outlasted us; is, after all, an important, authentic voice.* True, the editions were small and quickly sold out, for which queues snaked through entire cities. But now the genie was out of the bottle. Miłosz could be openly read and discussed and taught in his homeland. Was he still just the king of Albania? If so, the borders of his realm had been considerably expanded.

This seems to have had an effect on Miłosz’s writing. Doubt and struggle and dualism will never be completely absent from his poetry. However, as one can see in that most important work of the period, *Nieobjęta ziemia*, he feels more sure of the ground beneath his feet; sure, moreover, of his words being heard, finally, not just tossed out into the dumb ether, and the result is a more confident, almost apodictic, tone in much of his poetic pronouncement.

We begin our consideration of the Nobel period of Miłosz’s poetic oeuvre in a familiar place: the poet’s drive toward self-definition. In the final, prose section of “Świadomość” [“Consciousness”], from *Nieobjęta ziemia*, the narrator takes stock of his identity as the twentieth century crawls toward its close. The identity he arrives at is held together, paradoxically, by a central core of contradiction:

In the middle phase, following the end of one era and before the beginning of a new. Just as I am, with the habits and beliefs accumulated in childhood, with the impossibility of upholding them, faithful to them and unfaithful, self-contradictory, a wanderer in the land of dreams, legends and myths, I would not like to put myself forward as a person who clearly understands. (840)<sup>4</sup>

Despite his disavowal of “clear understanding,” the speaker expresses himself even here with an assurance of having arrived at some basis, some fundamental knowledge, upon which to build. The same sort of satisfaction, of self-confidence, may be found later in the volume, in the third prose section of the “Epigraf” that begins with a quote from Oscar Miłosz (a minor French poet and relative of Miłosz’s, whom the latter greatly admired). There we read:

And this is the life that I always wanted to live. Public matters entirely on the outside, and within, considerations of existence itself, enough to fill twenty four hours. And wherever I was, on whatever continent, in whatever city, was irrelevant. (900)

This seems more the Socratic ideal of a recluse than the bardic representative of the people—that poetic mantle we have seen Miłosz struggle with since his early years, and return to, overtly, in his Nobel speech. Yet it is not the final word on the poet’s orientation to reality, to “public matters,” and in an earlier “Epigraf,” the one fronted by a citation from René Le Senne’s “La découverte de Dieu,” a very confident, pontifical pose is taken:

“If, as consistent atheists, we replace God (understood as consciousness and will in contrast to human consciousness and will) with Society (the State) and History, we then have to say that whatever is found beyond the reach of societal and historical verification, remains set aside forever in the category of *opinion (doxa)*.” So said the great propagator of Hegel in France, Alexander Kojève (Kozhevnikov). And in this one statement is contained the prediction of an epoch, in which man, deprived of the idea of truth, will fall into a complete dependence upon the State. (846)

And here, in this eminently interesting collection of poetry, translations, notes in prose, citations from the books he has been reading and even private letters, which is *Nieobjęta ziemia*, the closest thing we have to a record of the poet’s consciousness from 1981-1984, we see two obsessions crystallize and coalesce into a firm theology and political science. Miłosz’s narrator, in this work, has come to understand that it is memory

—his favorite and accursed plaything—that proves the existence of God, in Anselmic fashion. If our memory of the past exists, in so subjective a manner, there must be an ideal, objective repository of the past somewhere—and that somewhere is the living mind of the living God. All persons acknowledge the existence of the past, at least in memory. That said, there remains only one choice—do we strive, as much as lies in our powers, to preserve the historical truth of the past, no matter what that might be? Or do we brush aside the idea of objective truth, discarding it into the trash bin with all other non-negotiable ideals? If the latter is the case, we play right into the hands of those who have the power, and the motivation, to subjectively alter the general perception of the past to suit their own interests. It should come as no surprise at all then, that Miłosz continues with a translation of the following sequence of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

O’Brien smiled faintly. “You are no metaphysician, Winston,” he said. “Until this moment you had never considered what is meant by existence. I will put it more precisely. Does the past exist concretely, in space? Is there somewhere or other a place, a world of solid objects, where the past is still happening?”

“No.”

“Then where does the past exist, if at all?”

“In records. It is written down.”

“In records. And—?”

“In the mind. In human memories.”

“In memory. Very well, then. We, the Party, control all records, and we control all memories. Then we control the past, do we not?”<sup>5</sup>

His elaboration of these thoughts is a matter-of-fact statement of a sentiment he, and so many other poets and thinkers opposed to totalitarianism, and its handmaid postmodernism, have said time and again: we cannot allow the manipulation of the past, for in doing so, we guarantee our own exploitation, our own enslavement, in the present and in the future:

It’s hard to argue with that. Whatever sort of reality exists for us, exists in as much as it is *seen*, or in other words subjected to the operation of our mind. Whatever surrounds us, touches us in a recast of ideas or speech—spoken, written, or imaged speech. All the more so, everything that has passed away is available to us only in the double recast to which the mind once subjected it, and to which it subjects it now. The past does not exist in any other form. Whoever would say otherwise simply states that the kaleidoscope of time, incomprehensible in each of its quarter-seconds, is



present in some sort of super-mind, which beholds the past, the present and the future, simultaneously. In other words, such a person believes in God. This, it seems, is the foundation of objective truth, which the agnostic Orwell was searching for. (847)

It is no coincidence that Miłosz underscores Orwell's agnosticism here. For in order to demonstrate the metaphysical, ultimately moral, truth of objective history, he does not escape to the Magisterium or any other sort of revealed authority; rather, he bases his demonstration on logic, a system of proofs available to all persons of reason, whether believers or doubters. A similar, syllogistic sentiment is contained in one of the prose fragments following his long citation of a letter from Józef Czapski:

The interior memory preserves everything which we have experienced and thought in the course of our entire life. Not a single second is missing there. Only, we have no way of contacting them, except for moments as short as the wink of an eye. The belief that, at death a man perishes completely, for all time, equals the idea that this super-sensitive "tape" is recorded for no one. That seems improbable to me. But when I think that somebody will read it, listen to it, immediately the picture of the Judgment rises before me. (884)

Totalitarianism can only be based upon a radical materialism that negates the spiritual, eternal aspect of existence. For only by depriving us of the hope—and fear—of what lies beyond this mortal coil, are the totalitarian bosses able to replace right and wrong with advantageous and disadvantageous, both of those ideas, in reference to no personal God or absolute moral hierarchy, but rather contingent upon the State, at the State's convenience. Thus the Soviet paradox: All is allowed means Nothing is allowed, and the man deprived of any outside referent for his actions is completely at the mercy of the arbitrary whims of those in power.

Despite the fact that *Nieobjęta ziemia* was not officially published in Poland until 1988, when the communist system was on life-support, it is still remarkable that such an open challenge to Marxist philosophy was allowed to be printed by a State publishing house. More significant for our discussion, however, is the fact that the sentiments, first published in 1984 in Paris, when the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe still appeared inconceivable, is the assumed tone of these lines, suggesting that with the acknowledgement of his writing that came with his Nobel Prize, Miłosz accepted the mantle of Mickiewicz and other "unacknowledged legislators" of his people, never to cast it off again.

In *Kroniki* [*Chronicles*, 1987], we find the succinct reiteration of this logical string, memory = objective existence of the past = existence of God = responsibility of moral action in the face of eternal judgment, in the poem “Argument.” Our perspectives are all different, but:

Each understanding is unique, irrecoverable, / even though just one line is added, one shade. / From this one can obtain a mighty argument for the existence of God, / for only He is able to record the register of suffering, / reconciliation, beatitude, terror and ecstasy. (5-9)

In speaking of the presence of a Christian persona in Miłosz’s poetic narratives, and of the seeming disparity between the poet’s own Catholic religiosity and the statements of his poetic personae, which seem at times to contradict it, we have spoken of the phenomenon of Miłosz’s “inner orthodoxy.” This idea posits that Czesław Miłosz the man is different from Czesław Miłosz the “I” of the lyric poems. It is always of course dangerous to identify the narrator with the poet—although, as we have had, and will have occasion to note, the narrative statement of many of Miłosz’s poems is so personal, so intimately linked to his own biography, that it is difficult *not* to make this identification. At any rate, Miłosz himself offers the inner orthodox hypothesis in *Nieobjęta ziemia*:

The literary tongue of the twentieth century was the language of unbelief. Making use of it, I could only express a portion of my faithful temperament. For we have crossed the border that separates us from another literature, a bit old fashioned, worth our sympathy but artistically second-class. (808)

In other words, only the “code” of unbelief is comprehensible in the twentieth century. Thus, Miłosz the poet had to use this “code of unbelief” in order to communicate with others. That is a paradox, if there ever was one. If we are to believe it, not only does it set the interpretation of much of Miłosz’s work in doubt—here in writing he repudiates the sacramental system as an absurd form of folk religiosity, but in reality, we are to suppose that he holds to all that the Catholic Church teaches—it also calls into question the possibility of contemporary religious verse.

It does, however, help us to understand poems such as “O modlitwie” [“On Prayer”], from this same collection, one of many we have seen in which the narrator confesses to a despairing grip on faith:

You ask me, how one can pray to someone, who doesn’t exist. / I only know that prayer builds a bridge of velvet, / over which we walk, bouncing, like on a trampoline, [...] / This bridge leads to the rim of

Reversal / where everything is backwards and the word “is” / reveals its sense barely intimated. / Note, I say “we.” Every single person there / has pity on others in the toils of the body, / and knows, that even if there were no opposite rim / they would step out onto that bridge above the earth all the same. (1-3;5-12)

This verse, coming right after another “Epigraf” opened by a citation from Pascal: “To contradict, believe and utterly doubt is for man what galloping is for a horse,” 843, is immediately followed by another, this time a citation from Oscar Miłosz: “To wait upon faith before one prays is to set the cart before the horse. Our path leads from what is physical to what is spiritual,” 844. The cynical might say that in verses such as this, the speaker allows himself just so much a confession of faith as might save him from the jibes of unbelievers more “in step” with the agnostic-atheistic spirit of the times. But in both “O modlitwie” and the quote from his elder relative, is Miłosz not saying just what orthodox theologians have always said, from the history of Thomas the Doubter through Kierkegaard and beyond: that faith is inseparable from the possibility of doubt? That it is only a virtue when its object cannot be proven empirically?

The other side of the coin can be shown in two verses from the collection *Kroniki*, in which the narrator takes atheists to task for their all too self assured inversion of faith: simple, straightforward and unswerving negation of Christian spirituality. Both of these poems come from the cycle *Dla Heraklita [For Heraclitus]*, in which the poet strives to create a register of his youth by recording significant personal memories, as well as general events from the beginning of the twentieth century. “Pierwsze wykonanie (1913)” [“Première (1913)”] refers to the first production of Igor Stravinsky’s *Rites of Spring*. The orchestra begins tuning its instruments:

Do you hear those parades of piccolos, the thumping of drums and tin? / Dionysus is on his way, long exiled Dionysus is returning, / the rule of the Galilean is over. / Ever more pale, bodiless, moon-like, / he fades into vapor, leaving us the dark cathedrals / with the colorful water of the stained glass windows and the little bell at Elevation. / The noble rabbi, who announced that he would live forever / and rescue his friends, awaking them from the dust. / Dionysus is on his way, shining olive-gold among the ruins of heaven. / His cry, that of earthly delight, is borne on an echo in praise death. (2-11)

What Miłosz wrote earlier about popular European culture, he applies here to “high” culture. Twentieth century Europe is simply unable to

comprehend, let alone give assent to, the God-Man Christ. Yet in all their “progressive” thinking, these neo-pagans are the most backward of all. For there is no resurrection, there is no eternal life, without Christ. In negating His suffering and death in favor of the unfettered sensual exuberance of Bacchus, they are exchanging eternal life for death; their corporal frenzy can only lead to a corporal end: the grave, beyond which nothing else lies. Christ is the only one holding out the promise of life beyond the grave—it is what made Christianity appealing to large sections of the Roman populace in the first place, thirsting as they were to fill the natural void in the human heart that rebels against the annihilation of the human soul in death, and which could be filled by nothing that the civic rites of Rome, the ancient Greco-Etruscan myths, or the philosophical metaphysics of the stoics could provide them with.

The eventual defeat of those who cast aside the Savior Christ for the pimp Dionysus is underscored by the slighting reference to Jesus as “the Galilean.” This word, in this context, first entered the European tradition in the dying words of the emperor Julian the Apostate. After his failed attempt to re-introduce paganism as the established religion of the state, he is reported to have cried on his deathbed *Galilae, vicisti!* [“Galilean, Thou hast conquered!”] These words, again in this context, have a special eloquence for Miłosz, as they are also the last words pronounced by the atheist, pre-Marxist revolutionary Leonard, in the Romantic closet drama *Nie-boska komedia* [*The Undivine Comedy*] by Zygmunt Krasiński. This is a work that interested Miłosz for its prophetic emphasis on the reality of history, which will outlast all totalitarian attempts—and those of their liberal, libertarian complements in the West—to dislodge morality and history from their objective bases.

In “Za Urałem” [“Beyond the Urals”], a kindred verse also subtitled “1913,” the speaker sarcastically attacks the early modern faith in progress, the fashionable, unreflective rejection of Christianity, which paradoxically leads to greater absurdities than those found in Holy Writ by these apostles of man. Two of these in-step characters, Valeyev and Peterson, chat about eternity and temporality in the vast spaces of Eurasia, in that part of the world that was soon to play so great a role in the concentrated twentieth-century siege of Christendom. Valuyev bats the promises of Christ aside with learned, materialistic hand:

No one wants the truth. Man cannot bear the truth. / It surpasses his measure. Escape, hide yourself / in the smoke of censors, in icons, in hymns, / in your goodness, false as it is, in relics and legends, / as long as you're with others, who pretend the same game as you. / And now it's over. Now perishes what had endured ages. / The shamans of islands and

continents shake their rattles / but they will not awaken, not awaken the  
Killed One. (16-23)

To this Peterson assents, yet replaces the “impossible” stories of Resurrection by the will of God with the even more outlandish idea of resurrection through material science:

We'll be done with religion. But with philosophy and art as well. /  
Because philosophy and art are engendered by that same terror of death, /  
whereas the eternally living gods have no need of them. / The human race  
will shortly create itself, / just as it began itself by the theft of fire, / and it  
will see its goal clearly, in the measure of its greatness: / to win a victory  
over death and become gods. / The promise will be fulfilled: the dead will  
rise again. / We shall resurrect our fathers, thousands upon thousands of  
generations. / We will populate Mars, Venus and the other planets. / The  
new man, happy and good, will not know songs of mourning. // Valujev:  
Why “good?” // Peterson: Because evil, in other words egoism, arises from  
the shortness of life. He who has / unlimited time, ceases to be predatory.  
// Valujev: Ha. (39-53)

What is the content of Valujev’s “ha?” Is he expressing a—perhaps, in his case, contradictory—healthy skepticism at the thought that man is at all perfectible, in a moral sense? Or is he rather sarcastically grunting at his interlocutor’s naiveté, for still thinking in categories of “good” and “evil?” Man, especially man eternized in laboratories, will be beyond these categories, after all.

Tomas Venclova is correct in pointing out that this road to the “perfection” of humankind will not lead to man’s liberation, but rather his enslavement. As he puts it in his article “Poetry as Atonement,”

The subordination of man to the laws of determination, his inclusion into nature, deprives life and death of meaning. [...] This reduction of man teaches us stoicism, but it also yields to vulgarization—in the schoolroom, in the works of second-rate thinkers, in the brains of potential dictators. Miłosz sees a profound link between the triumph of deterministic biology in the nineteenth century and the totalitarianisms of the twentieth, which propose that mankind follow either the law of the jungle or the law of the anthill, or, most often, both of them.<sup>6</sup>

Whatever the case may be, the narrator dismisses his protagonists with the terse note with which the poem comes to a close: “Both Valujev and Peterson were to be executed, shot dead, in 1918.” One more example of mankind’s fragility, especially vis-à-vis the eternal vitality of the God he would dethrone.

Yet we should know by now that nothing is simple and straightforward in Miłosz's poetry. His sarcastic rejection of atheistic materialism does not make him an apologetic, proselytizing Christian poet, a latter-day George Herbert or even a Francis Thompson. As the latter was pursued "down the days and ways" of material existence by the inexorable Hound of Heaven, so Miłosz's narrators, howsoever spiritual as they may be, inside, are, like Actaeon, pursued relentlessly by the whippets of material beauty and earthly delight. In the later sections of the prose and verse cycle entitled "Książd Ch., po latach" ["Father Ch., After Many Years"], in which the narrator struggles with the seeming antagonism of childish faith and individual, corporal experience, he wonders if, in abandoning himself to the delights of physical existence, he is not also subjecting himself to the diabolical prince of this world:

So, like it or not, you are singing my praises after all, / giving over to me everything which is great and splendid? // Evoked from nothingness, and returning to nothingness, strength and inebriation, and fecundity, and abundance. // And your life in ignorance on the rim of the abyss, / and the rhythms, to which you are subjected by the pulsing of your blood. / But there is no truth in this, nothing save illusion. / And thus for age upon age the world belongs to me. (stanza 5)

He not only acknowledges his devotion to the body, as St. Augustine and John Donne have done before him; unlike them, he can draw no thick line between earthly and heavenly love. The world is always with him, in a visceral and troubling way. The next and final section of this cycle reads:

That voice, persecuting me, so that I should confess, honestly, every day. // For I can't imagine myself among the disciples of Jesus / as they were wandering about Asia Minor from city to city / their words preparing the fall of the Empire. // While I, at the markets among the amphorae of wine, / in the arcades where tasty fitches are sizzling on the spits, / applaud the dancers, the wrestlers shining with oil, / browsing through colorful fabrics hawked by merchants from beyond the sea. // And who in their right mind would refuse tribute to the images of Caesar, / if it is by his grace that our lives are granted us? // I could never understand whence my stubbornness arose. // And whence this faith, that the pulse of my impatient blood / fulfills the designs of the silent God. (stanza 6)

Paradoxically, it is the very strength of temptation, so to speak, that holds him back from hurling himself into a whirlpool of abandonment to these mundane joys. The speaker of these lines has a sharp moral sense—even though at times this may be expressed in a less than orthodox

fashion—and this consciousness of the fact that one *can* opt for evil over good is what restrains him from giving himself over to luxury. It is this, among other things, that preserves him in his faith, an at times frantic, despairing faith, yet for that none the less solid and ever present: this existence of a real choice between an objectifiable right and wrong.

A kindred verse to the one we have just considered is “Pokusa” [“Temptation”], dated 1975 and published in *Czarnodziejska góra* [*Magic Mountain*, 1982]. Again, the “voice” that continually oppresses the speaker, is here personified as the “spirit of the vacuum:”

I was walking beneath the starry heavens / on the edge of a mountain  
summit from which one could see the neon city / with my comrade, the  
spirit of the vacuum, / who scurried about and instructed me / that I am in  
no way necessary, for if not me then someone else / would be walking  
about here, trying to understand his century. / Nothing would have  
changed if I had died long ago: / those same stars and cities and countries /  
would be seen, but not by my eyes. / This world, and its works,<sup>7</sup> would  
endure as they even now endure. (1-10)

The narrator’s response is sharp and fevered—it is clear that the voice he hears emanates from somewhere outside his own consciousness:

Get away from me, in the Name of Jesus Christ, / you have tortured me  
long enough, I said. / It’s not my job to judge peoples’ vocations. / And I  
I’ll never know my just deserts anyway. (11-14)

Several things are noteworthy here. This “spirit of the vacuum” is no metaphor. It is not a personification, for it is a person—the prince of darkness—and thus the narrator rushes to the foot of the Cross to escape temptation. Second, what the narrator fears most of all is negation, nihilism, nothingness. Christianity is a very reality-centered, material-centered religion (which is again why gnosis is incompatible with Christianity, which points to the sanctification matter through the fact of the Incarnation, *not* its rejection as evil). Third, the manner in which the narrator finishes his reply—“and I’ll never know my just deserts anyway” is a Freudian slip of sorts. By phrasing the matter thus, i.e. “Don’t tempt me with the impossible, for as wonderful as it might be, I know that I will never have the luxury of contemplating my hard-earned glory,” he subconsciously admits just how strong a temptation this actually is: the temptation, almost by reverse psychology, to the thirst for fame, egoism, the last infirmity of the noble mind, perhaps, but an infirmity nonetheless. He would like to be someone indeed. The cynical reader here might see an

almost blasphemous desire, in this overt reference to Christ's forty days of temptation in the desert, to present oneself as an *alter Christus*. But that that would be going too far. After all, orthodox theology often speaks of Christ not only as our brother, but as our pattern of behavior (viz. St. Thomas à Kempis) and encourages us to look to that pattern for an effective strategy in our battles with the forces arrayed against us.

That said, and intent should be the decisive element in our judgment in such matters, there is some basis for this sort of speculation. One can, from time to time, detect at least traces of a spiritual megalomania in Miłosz's poetry. Consider, for example, the stanzas of "Lecture II," from the cycle *Sześć wykładów wierszem [Kroniki]*. As so often happens, the sight of an unbelievably beautiful girl transports the poet to mystical heights:

The tender mothers and sisters, wives and mistresses. / Think of them.  
They lived once, and had names. / Once, on a hot Adriatic beach between  
the wars, / I saw a girl so beautiful, / that I wanted to capture her in the  
irrevocable moment. / Her slimness was tightly embraced in a swimsuit of  
silk / (This was before the era of artificial fabrics), indigo / or perhaps  
ultramarine. Her eyes, violet, / her hair blonde, lightly rusty: the daughter  
of patricians, / of knightly clans, perhaps, walking with an assured tread. /  
Bright-haired youths, equally good looking / formed her train. Sigrid or  
Inge, / from a home scented of cigars, the good life, order. (1-13)

Moving from the general to the splendid particular, Miłosz's narrator is having a Neoplatonic moment. Like Dante Beatrice, like Petrarca Laura, here the speaker catches sight of his *donna ideale* in Sigrid-Inge. And thus, even though the poet is shortly to renounce Dante, like him, he would eternize the particular in the realm of forms:

"Don't go away, crazy girl. Hide yourself / in hieratic sculptures, in the  
mosaics of cathedrals, gold colored dawns, / become an echo on the waters  
at the setting of the sun. / Don't lose yourself, don't trust anyone. It's not  
sublimity and glory / calling you, but a monkey-circus, your tribal rite."  
(14-18)

This is both clumsy and arrogant: clumsy in the too brusque, too juvenile, one would say, appeal to have the living flesh turn itself into marble, etc., which arises, of course, from the same simplistic duality of spirit-matter we have by now grown used to.<sup>8</sup> Arrogant, in that the speaker arrogates to himself the right to pontificate to the lovely bather, to impose his petty erotic philosophy upon her: "(Since you won't have me), reject that shining train of all too fleshly monkey-men and save your divine form



for the bodiless contemplation of the elect.” He would restate the Pygmalion myth backwards, depriving some living man of a lover, a wife, and his children of a mother, all in order to call forth a cold pastoral unfading, but inhuman. He would do this, *nota bene*, despite the fact that he has already effected something along these very lines by eternizing at least something of her physical excellence in his poem.

One gets the feeling that this poem, despite its defects, might have been better had the poet stopped here. For when he proceeds to reflect in a detached sort of way upon this concrete experience, things start to fall apart, and that megalomania only intensifies:

I might have said such things to her. Essence? Person? / Unique soul? And birthdate / and birthplace, like the position of the stars / will control a person? So that she would be seduced / by the love of custom, obedience as a virtue? // And yet Dante was wrong. It doesn't happen that way. / It is a collective sentence. Eternal damnation / would have to take them all, yes, all of them. / Which is probably impossible. Jesus has before himself<sup>9</sup>/ little vases with flowers, coffee, philosophizing, / a landscape painting, the beating of the clock on the town hall tower. / He will convince no one, wretched, with black eyes / and crooked nose, one of those vagrants / that the State quite rightly hooks<sup>10</sup> and takes away. / Now that I know so much, I have to absolve myself / of my own sins, so similar to theirs: / I wanted to catch up with others, be like them, / close my eyes and not hear the calling of the prophets. / And this is why I understand her. A house in a quiet neighborhood, greenery, / and a fugue by Sebastian Bach resounding from the depths of hell. (19-39)

How does the speaker arrive at the sentiment expressed in lines 19-23? More to the point, what sort of sentiment is he expressing here? Is he equating the cosmography of the *Divine Comedy*, the astrology of the *Vita nuova* (which, in contradistinction to the former, is merely a system of Neoplatonic metaphor, and definitely not anything approaching the untenable doctrine of predestination), with the social order of hieratic, patrician Europe, society, which will “doom” Sigrid-Inge to the life she has been born to? What evidence can he offer us to suggest that this predictable course of life is tragic to anyone but himself, and to himself merely because it places her out of his reach?

Dante is wrong, then. About what, we can only guess, for it is difficult to conceive of the tropes of the Florentine leading logically to anything like the collective damnation that is here protested against.

The rest of the verse is made up of the sort of reflection we have seen before, i.e. the shunting of Christ to the side by modern European culture. The narrator's arrogance takes on fresh ballast here in the suggestion that

Sigrid-Inge is one of these, and thus he “understands” her somewhat contradictory choice of that cozy bourgeois, amoral, unreflective life leading to a no less cozy hell from which faint snippets of Bach reach one’s ears.

A confusing “lecture” indeed. But what arrests us most in considering it is not his (sexist?) assertion of understanding what is going through the girl’s mind, or his hubris-filled *pronunciamento* on Dante (the sort of chest-beating that Dante gets out of his own system back at the Academy of the Poets in Limbo), but his great overreaching in deciding to absolve himself of his own sins. This is not merely a usurpation of God’s role, it is a confession to the world’s making of Him an irrelevant component that can be replaced by so frail and subjective a judge. Here *the narrator* is among those shunting Him aside, and thus it is perhaps not entirely irony when, in the lines above, he states his approval of the state’s clearing the streets of such baggage.

Has he, finally, succeeded in stopping up his ears against the prophets? This, again, is the problem with buying the idea of “inner orthodoxy” and its concomitant subjectification of any critical attempt at considering his spiritual content. Instead of “by their deeds you will know them,” we have the poet shrugging and saying “sure, I wrote that, but I didn’t really mean it; this is what I really hold true in the secret depths of my heart.” If it were our purpose to examine the poet’s religiosity, we must find it just as subjective as the *carte-blanc* of self-absolution we have just witnessed.

How much more satisfying, how much more realistic, does the poet seem when he eschews the racycinating urge and stops at the expression of mystical delight, as in the concluding, peace-filled lines of “To jedno,”<sup>11</sup> from *Kroniki*. The lines we would attract the reader’s attention to are 10-13:

A valley, and above it, forests in autumn colors. / The traveler arrives, drawn here by a map, / or perhaps by memory. Once, long ago, in the sun, / when the first snow had fallen, driving this way / he experienced a strong feeling of joy, without a cause, / a joy of the eyes. [...] He returns after the passage of years, demanding nothing. / He wants only one, priceless thing: / to become pure seeing without a name, / without expectations, fear and hope, / on the border where I and Not-I ends. (1-6; 9-13)

At times, this posture leads the poet back to the basic, childlike sense of the *sacrum* that informs earlier poems like “Modlitwa wigilijna.” He ends the poem “Stare kobiety” [“Old Women,” 1982, *Kroniki*] with:

He, who has been suffering for ages, gathers / ephemerae that live for but a day, / butterflies weakened by the cold, / mothers<sup>12</sup> with their chest closed with a scar, / and lifts them up toward his human Theotokos, / so that their comicality and their pain are transformed into nobility / and only this way, sans colors and beauty, is fulfilled / our imperfect earthly love. (18-24)

There is the beatific vision—*Dante's* beatific vision—so much fuller and indeed logical than the convoluted metaphysics of “Lecture II.” In reading poems like “Rok 1945” [“1945”], where catastrophe seems to have reduced the poet to the philosophical minimum, we seem to see Miłosz’s narrator receiving such a cathartic slap across the chops as to clear his head of all cobwebs better than the strongest smelling-salts. The poem records an actual meeting between Miłosz and the avant-garde poet turned Soviet propagandist, Adam Ważyk, shortly after the “liberation” of Poland by the Red Army:

“You, last of the Polish poets!”: drunk, he embraced me, / my once Avant-garde acquaintance, dressed in a long army coat, / who had survived the war in the East and came to “understand” there too. // Guillaume Apollinaire couldn’t teach him that, / nor could the programs of the Cubists and the Paris street markets. / The best medicine for illusion is hunger, patience and obedience. (1-6)

But whereas the hard experiences of war turned Ważyk, and others like him, into apostles of the new order promising a more just society in place of the corrupt prewar Europe, deprivation has shaken the stubborn Miłosz free of irrelevant intellectual baggage, and made him grip stubbornly, more fiercely, to the truths imbued in him in childhood:

I winked, laughable and rebellious, / alone with Jesus and Mary against the unvanquished power, / mindful of ardent prayers, gilded statues and miracles. // And I knew then that I would speak the language of the vanquished, no more enduring than the rest, household customs, / tinsel and comforting annual carols. (16-21)

Shortly before his death, Zbigniew Herbert was quoted in an interview as saying that in a way he regretted the fall of the repressive communist system. For its demise deprived him of something to write about, and now the only theme that remained him was his illness. It’s tempting to play the same game with Miłosz and wonder whether or not he was a plant that bloomed best in the hothouse of repression. Perhaps he had too much free time on his hands in California? Perhaps it was boredom, security, and a full belly that conjured up his manicheism and his other “heresies?” In that

familiar, despairing grip on faith, so often, the Cross he digs his nails into is the weatherbeaten, mealy crucifix that stands at a crossing of paths in the old Lithuanian countryside:

In the corridors of time / children are singing / *in uneven antiphony.* //  
*Many have been caught by death / in sleep, just this last night.* / *We have*  
*awoken once again this morning, / so as to praise Thee, God.* // As do I.  
 (5-12)

These lines are from the 1972 verse “Chagrin,” from *Czarnodziejska góra*. Near the end of *Nieobjęta ziemia*, the occasional verse “Poeta siedemdziesięcioletni” [“The Poet at Seventy”] ends with what sounds like a relieved unburdening of the conscience from over-thought:

To daub oneself in makeup and pomade, / to dress oneself in silk and  
 feathers, / and in the cooing speech of birds, / to pretend, that nature wills  
 it thus. / So much do you understand, philosopher. // And all of your  
 wisdom is for naught / although your life passed in its pursuit. / And now  
 you don’t know what to do, / because great beauty is a strong drink, / and  
 happiness is hard to leave behind. (26-35)

Everything should be accepted as it is, gratefully. Go along for the ride and thank the conductor at the end. Thus it should be for an artist so in love with material reality. Until, unfortunately, he once again becomes aware of himself as a perceiving being, and that perception of the ego leads him back into the labyrinth.

Sometimes, this happens unconsciously, this meddling intrusion of the ego. The poem “Zima” [“Winter,” from *Nieobjęta ziemia*], for example, is inspired by an obituary of Aleksander Rymkiewicz, a fellow student and poet from Wilno:

He was the youngest of our group, and I disdained him somewhat, / just as  
 I disdained many for having a second-rate mind / although I would never  
 equal them in many virtues. // And so here I am, as the century, and my  
 life, / are approaching the end. Proud of my strength / and ashamed, with  
 the clarity of sight. (6-11)

The poem then moves on from this particular death to a general reflection on human destiny, how the best among us so often meet with such cruel ends that one is led to doubt of the sense of justice and virtue: *T* “This century was not on the side of the goodhearted and righteous. / I well know what it means to engender monsters and recognize oneself in

them,” 16-17. Then again he moves from the general to the particular—to himself. The poem ends with this self-centered philosophizing:

And now I am ready for further flight / at the rising of the sun beyond the borders of death. / I already see the mountain ranges in the heavenly forests, / where behind each essence, a new essence reveals itself. // Music of my latter years, I am called by / sound and color ever more perfect. // Do not douse the fire. Enter into my dream, love. / May the seasons of the earth be forever young. (22-29)

There is of course nothing unusual in the notice of another’s death moving us to a consideration of our own mortality. Yet one gets the feeling that this speaker has kept his own company so long that he simply can’t finish a thought without relating it to himself. There is something disarmingly self-conscious about a poet who makes himself the main protagonist even of a poem about someone else’s death.

This curious turn of events, unconscious here, is rather a symptom of a deeper current of self-consciousness that runs throughout much of Miłosz’s poetry. One recalls, for example the first “lecture” from the previously-cited *Sześć wykładów wierszem*, in which the narrator comes to judge his earlier self, described in the poem as judging his happier contemporaries, whom he “holds in contempt, judge, observer,” 22. When he repeats this once more near the end: “Everyone who ever drew breath is responsible,” 39, he includes himself among the number of the responsible for how the world turned out in that crucial, cruel period 1939-1945, when so much changed for the world, for so many years, for the worse.

Now, even though the narrator includes himself in the number of those “responsible,” this does not change the fact that his judgment is necessarily unacceptable. There is no such thing as collective guilt. Although the “complicity” of those who “did nothing” in the face of horrible events has been a common proposition at least since the end of the Second World War, can it really be that all mortals are called to heroism, that acts of extraordinary bravery are required of all? The poem ends with the narrator’s “confession” to something, a sin that he himself cannot define:

Everyone who ever drew breath is responsible. / Everyone who ever drew what into their lungs? Air? Misunderstanding? Illusion? The Ideal? / Unclear, just like everyone, who lived then and there, / I make my confession before you, my young classmates. (39-42)

This reads like an olive branch extended to those he formerly despised. But that is not important. Rather, just as in the sixth lecture, discussed above, so here he we have a man—even in the position of co-defendant—shrugging on judicial robes and settling down on the bench without a codex of law or precedent to guide him; he smells a rat, and will nose it out, but cannot logically explain just what is going on, on what basis he is passing sentence, because the process, the trial, is in great part ego-centered, subjective.

We do not mean to suggest that the poet is comfortable with this position. That much can even be drawn from the poem in consideration. Further, in one of the prose segments that follows “Zima” in *Nieobjęta ziemia*, where (ironically, for sure) he compares himself to St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, we read:

You served time and rightly so, for it is not for us to jump out of our skin. But now there approaches the time for which, perhaps, you have been waiting, when you say, “I am the contemporary of Aristotle and St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas; why must I concern myself so much with the opinion of those who will live after us? One way or another, one measures ages distant and recent with the same yardstick. (809)

It would not be sarcastic at all to suggest that the poet’s at times confusing expressions reflect the very confusing age in which it was fated him to live and write. The question remains, maddeningly unanswered, but certainly not unanswerable, just *what* is that measure he refers to in the final sentence of the above-cited meditation? The very next prose poem in the collection reads:

Whence this humility of mine? From this, that I sit down to place signs on paper in the hope that I will express something, and am able to spend whole days at this, but when I set down a final full stop, I see that I have expressed nothing at all. I’d like to think of myself as a genius, but it doesn’t turn out too well. It’s true, I don’t know where the geniuses of literature are to be found, whom I might be jealous of. The old ones are trapped by the custom and style of their ages, while the new move about with difficulty in a transparent, clarified honey which is beginning already to cool. And then there’s me, with my constant insatiability, as at this moment, when I walk over to the window, see the tower with the clock, and below the snow on the greenswards of the campus in Ann Arbor, the girl walking over the path, and this itself, being here, by this window, in this moment like any other, that is, irrevocable, with the whiteness of the snow and the movement of those legs watched from high above, is sufficient to whip me into a lament on the insufficiency of language. (809)

Is that measure, then, the measure to which the poet is able to effectively give back the tangible reality, of which, somewhat like William Carlos Williams in this country, he has always been so enamored? In this, he would certainly be a disciple of St. Thomas, in so far as St. Thomas derives from Aristotle, for whom the concrete individual, and not the generalized ideal, is the starting point of all knowledge. And perhaps this is why he is at such a loss, expresses himself so unsuccessfully, unconvincingly, when he would formulate such general, global judgments as we consider above? Certainly this seems to be the conclusion he himself arrives at some twenty pages on:

Who will assure me, that I sense the world in the same manner as other people? It is not improbable that I constitute a departure from the norm, a monster, a mutation, and that what they experience is out of my reach. But if that is true, what right have I to express general opinions about mankind, history, the difference between good and evil, societies, political systems, as if didn't feel that my dissimilarity, although hidden, influences my opinions, changes proportions? (829)

If this, however humbly expressed, sounds suspiciously like the me-centered ethos of existentialists and post-modern relativists, it should come as no surprise. For such are the leading currents of thought, as confused as they may be, of this modern era that gave rise to the poet himself. Paradoxically, as he phrases it in the very next prose segment, his twentieth century is the era of the mass, as opposed to the individual, who disappears in the engulfing flood of the general:

What is the very essence of the experience of the twentieth century? Certainly, the helplessness of the individual. Everything's going on all around, developing, moving towards, carrying on, and the individual man has practically no influence on that at all. How is it, then, that what people themselves create, depends so little on their wills? (829)

Yet the triumph of the faceless mass is a triumph of relativism. What is lacking today is a common world view, such as Atlantic culture enjoyed even up until the end of World War I. Now, the individual, who before was guided by a secure faith in an overarching complex of unshakable, generally acknowledged moral principles, has seen the very principle of overarching, general moral systems exploded. He is now totally alone, made to fend for himself, one against the world conglomerate, instead of one supported by a like minded global community:

As late as one hundred years ago, man, equipped with reason and free will, awaited a state in which all obstacles standing between him and the full display of that reason and will would disappear. (829)

The individual is helpless in a world ruled by relativism, where words such as outlaw and assenter have no more meaning, where abnormality is the only norm—a world of completely autonomous moral agents. The very age that claimed to liberate the individual, has destroyed the individual, by depriving him of all distinguishing characteristics, even reprehensible ones:

The idea of sin, which has been jettisoned in order to keep pace with progress, was both necessary and helpful. For I, the sinner, bore a burden that I could cast from my shoulders, as it was not a part of me. I could confess my sin, and in this way leave it behind me. Now, my guilt is located inside me: it is found in my genes, my destiny, my nature. And yet by experience I have come to understand that I am like the water of a river, reflecting the changing colors of the banks between which I flow, the storms, clouds, the azure of the sky—being myself without color. (874)

Yet, as we have seen, the poet is somehow vaccinated against despair. He sees that the only antidote to such radical monadism is that collective of faith, and the only organization that still provides, however imperfectly (*lex orandi lex credendi*) man with the common backdrop against which everything extraordinary, good as well as bad, becomes visible, is the Church:

The Church. The only place where people are *not facing other people*, yet all the same are not simply beheld (as they are in the theater). The person facing other people never appears completely without defensive reflexes, in other words, when eyes meet we have a duel of two subjects. Before the *sacrum* man does not have to defend himself. There was a lot of sense in the position of the priest standing with his back to the faithful, like the leader of a chorus. (875)

Some of the pithy, caustic aphorisms that make up the idiosyncratic Greek Anthology that is the collection *Zdania* [*Sentences*] from *Czarnodziejska góra* testify to the poet's assent to the obvious existence of this unchanging moral background for man's actions. "Poeta nowoczesny" ["A Contemporary Poet"], which reads "Imprisoned in Hell, he asserts that Hell does not exist" hearkens back to another early modern poet, who wrestled with similar concerns in the early seventeenth century. Although the devil is standing before him in person, Christopher Marlowe's Doctor



Faustus chides, “Come, I think Hell’s a fable,” to which Mephistopheles replies “Aye, think so still, until experience change thy mind.” “Szczerosc” [“Sincerity”], which immediately follows, drips with auto-sarcasm, considering the poet’s early forays into subjective judgmentalism: “How on earth am I to love my neighbors if they are deserving of death?” Again we have an echo of Faust, whether we read this line positively, i.e. “No one deserves my love, as I find everyone deserving of death,” or negatively, v.g. “Everyone cannot be deserving of death, original sin notwithstanding. Otherwise, how could I love any of them, which I do?” Just like Marlowe’s Faust at the beginning of the play, when the learned doctor tosses theology aside (since, if the wages of sin are death, he mistakenly reasons, and if we lie if we say we have no sin in us, therefore, we must all die an everlasting death), so here Miłosz’s narrator, as worldly- or bookishly-wise as he may be, has forgotten the simplest truth known to all gradeschool catechumens: Christ’s salvific Death on the Cross has canceled out our debt, our death, bypassed the fatal logic, replacing the demanded despair with the un hoped-for rejoicing. Hence again the need for that community facing God, spoken of previously. Man alone, or man facing mere man, is cut adrift in a serum of relativism, and is prey to subjective cogitations which are necessarily unprovable, because lacking foundation in objectivity.

Yet Hell is most certainly not other people; hell is a total, independent, enclosure of the self, a casting off from all community with God and man. It is no coincidence that Dante, who uses Italian, Latin and Provençal in his *Divina commedia*, has the prototype of communion-wreckers, Nimrod, race about the floor of Hell uttering gibberish that no one can understand.

If we choose to read that portion of the aphorism “Poeta nowoczesny” alleging his habitation of the Hell he does not recognize as an inference to the bloody twentieth century, we are returned to Miłosz’s statement about poets, writers, and all thinkers being simply unable to avoid permeation by the immediate culture that has formed them. The European poet of the twentieth century has all the right to cry out in the words of Ernest Hemingway’s couplet: “The age demanded that we dance / And jammed us into iron pants.” This unavoidable curse of subjectivity comes to mind when we consider the Epigraph from *Nieobjęta ziemia* which is a translation from Simone Weil’s *L’amour de Dieu et la malheur*. Whatever its resonance in the ears of a European, especially one from beyond the Iron Curtain, may be, it certainly rings dully on the ears of those who have been spared widespread calamity:

*What on the other hand is really constantly present, and what for that reason one is always allowed to love, is the very possibility of misfortune.*

*Three aspects of our essence are constantly confronted with this possibility. Our body is fragile. Any small bit of matter in motion is able to puncture it, tear it, crush it, or vitiate the function of one of its internal mechanisms. Our soul is easily wounded, experiencing depressions without cause, wretchedly dependent on the most varied things and beings, which in their turn are fragile themselves and capricious. And our social personality, upon which the sense of our existence almost totally depends, is constantly and fully exposed to dangers of all sorts. The very root of our being is so united to these three things, that it feels each deeper wound, and even bleeds on account of it. This is especially true of all that lowers or destroys our social prestige, our right to be regarded, which seems to change or even ruin our very essence—to such an extent is delusion our substance. (830)*

The thought arises almost of its own accord: Would she have written thus, felt thus, had she spent her life in Big Sur, instead of occupied France and England, where she nervously, daily expected the black wave of Nazism to engulf the little island refuge? It's hard to think so. What then? Is all truth necessarily subjective? Not at all. One need not have experienced the same sort of suffering as Weil in order to be able at least to comprehend her position, even if one can not, perhaps should not, share it. But as it is something that resonated with Miłosz, it is all the more noteworthy that the pessimism it expresses is balanced by, perhaps even cancelled out by, another manner of looking at unjustified calamities that attracted him. The cycle “Świat i sprawiedliwość” [“The World and Righteousness”] opens with another translated citation, this one from a 1948 edition of *Hammer on the Rock: a Short Midrash Reader*:

*Rabbi Levi said: / If the world is what you are after, you cannot expect any righteousness. / If righteousness is what you're after, you cannot expect the world. / Why is it that you grab at both ends of the rope / seeking both the world and righteousness? / Let go of one end, / before your stubbornness leads the world to destruction. (827)*

Although the title of this cycle sounds like an ironic, jaded echo of his postwar slogan “Prawo i sprawiedliwość” [“Law and Righteousness”], “Świat i sprawiedliwość” actually presents us with a positive message. There are two systems set before us, as it were, which impinge upon our existence: that of the temporal world, and that of the eternal. These two systems should not be at odds with each other, but too often they are. Righteousness, to express it according to the dichotic tropes of Rabbi Levi, is not of this earth, and vainly will he seek it, who looks for it here below, where men and history are more often than not motivated by force,

self interest, rapine and deceit. But this does not mean that it does not exist at all. It does, but in the eternal sphere, which overarches all, individual, temporal existence and act, and, if one is forced to choose between them—the world or righteousness—it is the latter which must be chosen. Only in this way can one objectively live better in this imperfect world; only in reference to that overhanging, immutable justice that is in the mind of God, uncompromising right and wrong, can one judge, deal with, identify, avoid or fight against the prevailing moral chaos of our life here and now. This is not just Rabbi Levi's vision, it is the vision arrived at by Dante at the end of the *Divine Comedy*, when he is granted the grace to see the universe as it is: not a chaos of haphazardly scattered leaves, but a comprehensible book, bound together by Love. That is the common vision upon which we must all train our eyes in order to escape the prison of relative, objective judgment.

Miłosz's narrator arrives at this very conviction of an underlying, communal sense at moments of mystical enlightenment, such as that described in stanza four of the poem "Świadomość" ["Consciousness"]:

Fat and thin, old and young, male and the female / carrying their suitcases  
and bags, file down the airport corridor. / And suddenly, I feel that it is  
impossible, / that this is only the underside<sup>13</sup> of a tapestry / and that beyond  
it is the other side, which explains everything.

Rabbi Levi's insight is also behind the proper understanding of the little verse ironically—given its size—entitled "Teodycea" ["Theodicy"]. Waggling his finger at theologians, the speaker warns them:

Your honest effort will not rescue God's morality. / For if indeed He  
created beings able to choose between good and evil, / and so they chose,  
and for that reason the world wallows in evil, / there still remains  
suffering, the unmerited torture of creatures, / which would find its  
satisfying explanation only then, / if you accepted an archetypical Paradise  
/ and in it, the fall of ur-humans so great, / that the world of matter  
obtained its form through a diabolical power.<sup>14</sup> (2-9)

This can be read as a manichean, dualist poem, which challenges twenty centuries of orthodox Christian teaching on man's fall from God's friendship, were it not for the Epigraf immediately following it—a translation from Lev Shestov's *Afimy and Jerusalem*. Speaking of Job, a predictably favorite Biblical character of Miłosz's, Shestov reasons:

*Whatever "explanation" for his misfortune there might be only increases  
Job's pain. No explanations, no answers are necessary. Consolation and*

*encouragement are also unnecessary. Job curses the friends who visit him for that very reason, because they are his friends, and, as his friends, the wish to "lighten" his burden, to the extent that any man can bring relief to another. For Job, that "to the extent" is the worst thing of all. Since one can't really help him—it's better not to console. In other words: one can ask (and in the case of Job it's impossible not to ask): whence comes evil? But one must not answer that question. And only when philosophers will understand that one must not answer that question, and many other such questions, will they realize that we don't always ask questions in order to obtain an answer; that there are questions, the whole meaning of which is based on this, that they don't admit of answers, because each answer kills them. This isn't quite understandable? What's to be done. Man has gotten used to harder things.* (879)

*Unde malum?* is not the proper manner of stating the question, which apart from revelation is by nature unanswerable. Rather, we should say *Malum est. Quid nunc facemus?* Thus, in a later prose fragment (883) which reads:

Miracles, according to Simone Weil: not the trampling of laws, but the working out of laws which are unknown to us. In the same vein, I believe that the Mother of God appeared at Lourdes and Fatima. But it is much more difficult to believe in God's rule over the world

we should not read this as a questioning of God's reign, which the speaker in any case does not reject, but states that he cannot comprehend. Rather, the proper interpretation is—Questions such as "Why does God allow evil and injustice?" are unhelpful and unanswerable. It is faith in His will to enter into history—personally, through the Incarnation, and through the ages, through Mary and the saints—that is more important. Upon this our faith and confidence are nourished, not upon philosophical, scholastic speculation.<sup>15</sup>

Man is a communal animal. And just as the piety expressed in the poetry of Czesław Miłosz is most compelling when it is expressed in the visceral tropes of a religiosity imprinted upon him in childhood, so is his eschatology most consistent with a Christian world-view when it is expressed according to the reality of the Communion of the Saints.

In "Odstąp ode mnie" ["Get away from me"], a verse written in 1977 and thus expressive of the loneliness and vulnerability of his early California period, Miłosz's speaker turns angrily upon a very real dark spirit, tempting him at his elbow:

Get away from me, dark spirit. / Don't say that you are the truth of my being / and that my whole life was nothing but a covering up of evil. / I exorcise you through my moments of unselfish love, / although they were few. / I exorcise you through what I have done for others, / even if my heart was not fully in it. / Torture me not in my hour of trial. (1-8)

It is an echo of Matthew 16:23, of course, but here the speaker is a fragile mortal. And it is of great consequence that in his extremity he appeals for aid to those saints who struggled on to the victory before him:

You sainted youths, who offered the sacrifice of your lives in battle, / aid me, a cripple. // You completely unknown sisters of powerful mercy, rescuing prisoners behind the barbed wire, / be with me in the air of this night. // You workers of manly heart, for years on end greeting the iron day in silence, / lend me the brightness of your forgotten names. // Hymnically I conjure you all and recall you. (9-12)

If the world *were* merely a casual broth mixed of unrelated, haphazard human particles, with each one struggling on his own, there would be no way out in crises like this. However, the reality of the Communion of the Saints is the strongest proof of the overhanging, immutable reality of good to which we are called, and are able, to orient ourselves to; it is the fixed pole-star, described in the hagiographical sea-charts handed down to us, that leads us safely to port:

If man can be like you / I too participate in true human nature. // Against my will you have touched me. / Against my will you address me, dark spirit. (13-16)

The will, too, is proof of an absolute hierarchy, objective, independent of subjective whim. It implies options, and options of a moral sort, between good and evil, fight and surrender, sacrifice and acquiescence. The very real, human faculty of choice logically presupposes the reality of options to choose among, and the reality of an evaluative hierarchy according to which the choice is made. Those who choose well enough to gain the victory over the dark spirit of negation are the saints, and the reality of their shining troop is proven by Miłosz's narrator according to a stubborn devotion to historical, material, experiential reality.

If the future does not exist, the same cannot be said of the past. There is more than one way to answer the question posed by Inspector O'Brien. If something actually, really, tangibly, ever existed, can that same real moment, made up of real people and objects co-existing at the same time, ever cease to exist? Ever cease to be? Perhaps time should not be

understood as a stream, but rather as stacked layers. We stand on (or in) the topmost layer, and just because we can't physically penetrate or move between the layers stacked underneath us is no argument for their non-existence, their evaporation. This is exactly the conclusion that Miłosz arrives at in his introduction to the cycle *Dla Heraklita*:

Maybe it happens like this because one of our human privileges is the indestructible faith in another dimension of time, which posits that whatever has once passed has been transferred to that other dimension and endures there forever. (936)

It is this too that informs the faith in the Communion of the Saints that we find from time to time in the poems. Addressing his deceased priest friend, Józef Sadzik, in the penultimate verse of the *Rue Descartes* cycle (1980), Miłosz has his narrator say:

To be honest, both Heaven and Hell are foreign ideas to us, / just like the Elysian Fields and Nirvana. / And there is no respected guide / nor has a map of these regions been drawn. // [...] The living are too closely united with the living / for me to recognize closed borders, / and leave you, alive, in the realm of shadows, / on the banks of the underground river. // May the Communion if the Saints be triumphant, / the purging fire, here and everywhere, / and everyday the resurrection along with the dead / to Him, who is and was and will be. (1-4; 9-16)

What was real once, in this case Fr. Sadzik, can never become unreal by passing over to that "other dimension," which, by the way, being eternal, is actually a higher state of reality than that which we experience now. He remains real in a manner that we cannot, perhaps, comprehend, yet is something much too great to be explained in mythological or ritual terms. As real as they are, these terms are once removed, at least, from physical reality, the imperative for both Miłosz and Catholicism.

The "real" perception of the enduring past may emphasize, or lead one to a conception of, the real Communion of the Saints. But one does not become one of those sainted youths to whom the poet appeals in "Odstap ode mnie" simply by having existed, simply because matter, physical and spiritual, once created, cannot be destroyed. The damned are also, after all, eternally in being. The Communion of the Saints is enlarged by people who, during this life, cooperating with God's grace, choose righteousness over moral compromise with the world, good over evil, positive action over destruction or apathy. "Zasługa" ["Merit"], one of the aphorisms of *Zdania*, reads: "He so arranged it, that his descendants / Plant trees and listen to the sound of bells." One is tempted to see here

another reference to Bl. Junipero Serra, the apostle of California, who founded so many beautiful missions up and down the state, or Fr. Eusebio Kino, the intrepid Jesuit missionary of Arizona, who caused the desert to bloom in so many places by planting trees that one still comes across in Tucson and the surrounding areas, still bearing fruit. Of course, the reference is not exclusive, and refers to all positive actions that elicit an echo through the ages. By such links are we bound with the past, by such links of responsible, individual action, undertaken in harmony with the hierarchy of the moral imperative, by such are we bound to eternity.

The most touching of these references is that found in the 1985 verse “Z nią” [“With Her”], which Miłosz wrote concerning his own mother, and her example of responsible Christian action,<sup>16</sup> the title of which poem again emphasizes continued presence:

In 1945, during the great shifts of population at the end of the Second World War, my family left Lithuania and found themselves in the area around Gdańsk, where they were quartered in a house belonging to a family of German peasants. Of them there remained in the house only one elderly German woman, who had come down with the typhus but had no one to take care of her. My mother, ignoring all arguments, nursed her, contracted typhus herself, and died.

So reads the note that follows the verse in *Kroniki*, which describes his suddenly being reminded of her during Mass on his seventy-fourth birthday:

This Sunday’s readings from the Book of Wisdom / that God did not create death / and does not rejoice in the annihilation of the living. / The Gospel was from Mark / about the little girl to whom He said: *Talitha, kum.* / That’s for me. That I should rise again, with the dead / and repeat the hope of those who lived before me. / In terrifying oneness with her, with her agony / in the little village near Gdańsk, in dark November, / when mournful Germans, the elderly and women / and resettled Poles from Lithuania were dying from typhus. / Be with me, I say to her, too short was our time together. / Your words have now become my own, within me: “*It seems to me as if everything were but a dream.*” (5-18)

An everyday existence, eternized by sacrifice on behalf of another. If life passes quickly by, as quickly as a dream, that is only to awaken into a new, eternal day—but only on the basis of responsible action. We may not all be called to heroic moral action, like the Blessed Franz Jägerstätter, who accepted capital punishment at nearly the same time as Miłosz’s mother’s nursing of the German woman, rather than resign

himself to conscription into the Nazi war machine, or such as that displayed by the painter friend that Miłosz eulogizes in the *Osobny zeszyt* [*Separate Notebook*] collection:

Mieczysław had an atelier in the city of Warsaw. / He was a latter student of yours, had almost mastered it, / as he told me, blowing on cold hands / that wartime winter. A clay jug and an apple, these were his obsessions; / with these he filled his canvas / and I believe that he would have torn from the objects the moment of perception / if he only kept strictly to the rules of art, / which are indifferent to good and evil, / joy and pain and the laments of mortals, / the elevated servant of one aim. // But he used his atelier to help others / and hid Jews there, for which the punishment was death. / He was shot in May, 1943, / giving his life in this way for his friends. // And bitter it is to sing the praises of the mind, Cézanne. (45-59)

But Miłosz's mother, with her practical, humble, everyday sacrifice offers us no less valid an example of the Christian life. The key is an acknowledgement of the objective nature of right and wrong, and the commitment to conform our actions according to it. Very eloquent in this connection is Lecture V from the *Sześć wykładów wierszem*:

Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. Whoever believes in this / should not behave like we do, / who have lost our sense of up and down, right and left, heaven and the abyss, / and yet we strive somehow to muddle through, in cars, beds, / men clutching women, women men, / falling down, getting up, putting on the coffee, / spreading butter, / because it's another day again. (1-7)

The startling renewal of nature that we supposedly acknowledge when Easter, or any Sunday Mass, is commemorated should, the narrator argues, constitute a radical re-orientation of every moment of our lives. It should not be merely an additional ritual *de rigueur* such as a birthday celebration, or a Fourth of July cookout. Still, the poem goes on to describe a contemporary Christmas as a fiesta of bright lights and presents, the hibernal quasi-religious pause in the gray year in which Santa Claus overshadows the manger in Bethlehem, just as the "Easter bunny's" shadow obscures, absurdly and horridly, the light emanating from the open Tomb. Yet the poem is much more than a bitter reflection upon the anemic commercialization and laicization of religious feasts. It speaks, as we mention above, of a culture in crisis, of an entire civilization that has been strained bland of all higher, religious and moral sense:



The theologians are silent, and the philosophers / don't even dare ask: "What is truth?" / and thus, after great wars, in indecision, / almost with good will, but not fully, / we work with hope. And now, let's everybody / admit it to ourselves: / "He rose from the dead?" "I don't know if He rose from the dead." (24-29)

This is a challenge to all who call themselves Christian, no less imperative and demanding than Eliot's *Idea of a Christian Culture*, written some half-century beforehand.<sup>17</sup> Christianity is not an empty system of symbols into which one is born; it is not a coincidentally bestowed race, ethnicity or citizenship. It is a philosophical system with clearly defined postulates, to which one must, some day, consciously assent in order to continue life under that Name. Truly, the life not reflected upon is not worth living; at the very least, it is a dishonest existence. All people, and Christians are no exceptions, must take stock of the philosophies they claim to live by, act according to them, or change their orientation accordingly. It is a matter of intellectual honesty.

It is also a matter of individual responsibility, predicated upon the recognition of vital, unique, individual existence. For even if, as he explains in *Dla Heraklita*, the passage of time fascinates us by the manner in which it reduces all men to the same pitiable state of elemental helplessness:

The riverbank on which we stand watching the current bear away familiar scenes /also bears away/ ourselves, though we delude ourselves to think that we are standing on the riverbank. And because this is our common lot, so that through the power of time disappear all characteristics that might differentiate us, a basic feeling of human solidarity must take voice, (932)

still we must struggle against the philosophical consequences that such a truth may usher in—the vanity, or even irrelevance of the individual human life.<sup>18</sup> Miłosz protests against this most strongly and most touchingly in Lecture IV, when his speaker recalls Jadwiga, a librarian buried alive beneath the rubble of a building during the Warsaw Uprising of 1944:

Man's true enemy is generalization. / Man's true enemy, so-called History, / which recommends herself, and terrorizes, by her plural number. / Don't trust her. She is deceptive and treacherous, / She is not anti-Nature, as Marx advised us, / and if she is a goddess, she is the goddess of blind Fate. / The little skeleton of Miss Jadwiga, the place / where her heart once beat. This alone I set / against necessity, law, theory. (23-31)

Poems like this bring squarely to the fore the question of “inner orthodoxy.” Is Miłosz, the Christian, dropping his guard here, and allowing us a glimpse into the workings of his “real” mind? Or is this speaker too just one more of many personae, the views of whom may or may not be the poet’s own? For despite the new-found confidence with which, via such narrators, Miłosz resumes his bardic pronouncements after the Nobel, despite his frontal attacks on totalitarian philosophy via a defense of the traditional, Christian worldview,<sup>19</sup> in other places, his narrators do not cease to fondle the contradictory intellectual toy of gnosticism. In *Nieobjęta ziemia*, amidst the very considerations of individual responsibility and the sense of evil that we discussed earlier, we find inserted this prose reflection that stands at odds with both the individual, and the possibility of responsible action:

The view of old, pale, mumbling people leaning heavily on their canes, neither male nor female, for the differentiation of gender has been effaced. And next to them there lightly pass broad-shouldered boys and doe-eyed girls, most obviously the very same as these, only so many years before. It seems as if an anonymous current coursed through people, abandoning them after a few overturnings of the hourglass of their exterior forms, and leaving behind, instead of living beings, a collection of broken dolls. Now, gazing at this, how is it possible to believe in the vocation of the unique and unrepeatable soul? (876)

Perhaps when reading such things, we should remind ourselves that Miłosz is a poet, and that texts such as *Nieobjęta ziemia* are collections of poetry, not philosophical statements. The same consequence and logic that we expect of the latter cannot be demanded of the former, especially in the case of so ideolexical a work as *Nieobjęta ziemia*, which aims at constituting a poetical record of the intellectual influences and flashes of inspiration that made up his creative mind between the years 1981-1984. Such a thought as this, then, so out of step with the main current of his thought as recorded in the volume,<sup>20</sup> must be understood as just such a dispassionate, honest record of what occurred to him at a particular moment. It may be the exception that proves the rule. We say this out of deference to Miłosz, without, at the moment, reference to the task of the critic working with his poetical oeuvre. For whether or not this or that volume of poetry is a philosophical statement, the critic seeking to comment meaningfully on the entirety of a poet’s corpus is entitled to believe in the existence of a main current in the poet’s thought, a consistency of viewpoint, which will, consciously or unconsciously, reveal a systematic and recognizable, if complex, mind. We will take this up

more broadly in the final chapter of this discussion, where we set Miłosz in the context of certain easily-definable Catholic poets. At the moment, we will restrict ourselves to suggesting that the main current of Miłosz's thought, as expressed in his poetry, is a pattern of contradiction, built up over a superstructure of an ambivalent humanism, which at times defends the human person against all comers, and at others betrays an elitist disdain for the human individual. Obviously, the theory of "inner orthodoxy," which seeks to purposefully set the individuality of the artist outside the parameters of the opinions expressed in his art, renders the critical task doubly difficult, if not impossible.

Getting back to the exception at hand, a great exception it is, for in the wake of its eastern/gnostic statement "I am all" comes the conclusion inexorably following, "therefore, I am nothing." And with this, all individuality in multiplicity, all possibility of right and wrong action, disappears.

The one notorious example of Miłosz's dalliance with gnostic thought during this period is the incomprehensibly popular *Hymn o perle* [*Hymn of the Pearl*]. This is a fairly long translation or *wolna przeróbka* ["free adaptation"], in Miłosz's own words, of a third-century gnostic text by Bardesanes. The Christ-figure of the prose sequence is sent down into Egypt by his heavenly mother and father, in order to retrieve a pearl:

And they wrote upon my heart, so that I should not forget: "Thou shalt descend into Egypt and bring thence the Pearl, which lies in the midst of the sea, wrapped in the folds of a gaping dragon, and then thou shalt again dress thee in thy robe of glory and thy over-covering, and along with thy brother, our vicar, thou shalt inherit the Kingdom." /.../ Therefore I approached the dragon directly, abiding in an inn next to his habitation, waiting for him to fall asleep, that I might take from him the Pearl. /.../ All alone, keeping myself alone, was I a stranger among those reveling in the inn. But then I saw someone from my own tribe, a beautiful and graceful youth, the son of kings. He attached himself to me, and when I revealed to him the reason for my being there, he warned me about the Egyptians and the company of the unclean. / Yet I dressed myself in their robes so that they should not suspect me, as one arriving from other parts seeking the Pearl, so that they should not arouse the dragon against me. /.../ My parents knew what was happening with me and worried about me. And it was announced in our Kingdom that all should congregate before our gates. And the kings and princes of the Parthians, and all of the great men of the East, deliberated how it should be effected that I should not remain in Egypt. And they wrote a letter unto me, which each of them inscribed with his name. /.../ And at the voice of this letter did I awaken and arose from my sleep. I embraced it, kissed it, broke its seal and began to read it. /.../ Then did I cast spells at the horrid gaping dragon and drew a sleep

over his eyes, pronouncing over him the name of my Father, the name of our vicar and the name of my mother, the queen of the East. /.../ I took away the Pearl and set off on my return journey to the home of my Father, casting away from me their foul and unclean clothes.] (685-687)

That should be more than sufficient to indicate the sort of insufferable foolishness that is the *Hymn of the Pearl*, and really the entire gnostic corpus. One wonders why such an intelligent man as Miłosz would even take something like this into consideration. Its thought is transparently silly and its quasi-mystical literary qualities practically non-existent. What is going on here?

For an answer we must turn to his introduction. There we read:

A. A. Bevan, who republished the Syrian version in 1897, believes that the author was most likely Bardesanes (154-222 AD), a gnostic condemned by the Christians for denying the doctrine of the resurrection, and for being of the opinion that the division of the soul from the body was a blessing. (685)

It is the very fact of Bardesanes's heresy, his refusal to acquiesce to the imposition of orthodoxy, that catches Miłosz's attention. Although it is already the 1970s and the exiled Miłosz no longer has to write in code in order to circumvent the censor, it is obvious that Bardesanes is, for him, a prototype of Winston Smith, of himself, the dissident. Miłosz's interest in gnosticism arises not only from his reflecting on the nature of evil in the world (when he has too much time on his hands), but also from an anti-totalitarian urge to assert the fantastic as intellectual option, against the totalitarian canons of exclusive materialism. Unlike Rio Preisner, who sees a direct line between gnosticism, as refusal of "real reality" [skutečná skutečnost] and the totalitarian drive to re-shape men and the world irrespective of reality (reality is what the man with the gun at your head says it is), Miłosz uses gnosticism as an irreverent thumbing of the nose at groupthink.

Miłosz's attraction to heterodox thought also has a cultural basis. The (Western) world is too much with him, as his narrator suggests in a prose segment from *Nieobjęta ziemia* immediately following the aforementioned Simone Weil quote:

I do not like the Western manner of thinking. I could also say: the manner of thinking of Western intellectuals, but then I would be passing over the transformation which has taken place over the last few decades. And that transformation (not a sudden one, but one that has become present, like pubescence or old age) rests on the disappearance of a distinction between

the enlightened, the “knowing,” the progressive, the intellectually liberated and the so-called masses. The great schism has been effected, and we have returned to an agreed-upon world outlook, just like in the middle ages, when theologian, cooper and farmer all believed in the same thing. The schools, television, and the newspapers have allied themselves so as to direct our minds in the direction desired by the “liberated” ones. And the victory has arrived: a world view which is incumbent upon all under the threat of a punishment being the modern equivalent of the old pillory and pyre: becoming a laughingstock. (831)

As his compatriot Krzysztof Zanussi says, there is high culture and low culture, or there should be; even though commerce between the two can and often does take place, there is a danger in the leveling, Disneyfication of modern Western culture that is just as repulsive as a hermetic snobism. It is fair to wonder whether, philosophically speaking, for all his “heretical” tendencies, Miłosz would reject all “medieval” constructs qua medieval, qua synesthetic; whether the problem is simply that our contemporary culture imposes a context of thought on individuals, or rather whether it is not that this inescapable modern “medievalism” imposes a *mistaken* context upon us, leading us to think *wrongly*.<sup>21</sup> Such seems to be suggested by a prose statement some few pages later on:

There is only one great theme. And that is the end of the era which has lasted for nearly two thousand years, when religion occupied a place superior to philosophy, science and art, which certainly means, quite simply, that one believed in Heaven and Hell. These have disappeared from the imagination and no poet nor painter is able to re-populate Heaven and Hell anew (although patterns for Hell exist here, on the earth).<sup>22</sup> (842)

Try as he may, Miłosz cannot (fortunately) get away from the Thomism of his early education, his logical certainty of the existence of an Absolute, which (or Who) is the anchor to all moral discussion, all moral action. When one loses the certainty of this sublime moral order, this eternal law upon which all human law, civic and personal, should be based, as is the case in our day and age, the trouble begins.<sup>23</sup> When objective right and wrong disappear from the consciences of a people, a vacuum of criteria occurs that must be filled with something else. “Poznanie dobra i zła” [“Coming to Know Good and Evil”], from this same volume, ends with these lines touching on this topic, just a bit too optimistically:

When people stop believing in the existence of evil and good, / only beauty will call them to itself<sup>24</sup> and rescue them, / so that they should again know how to say: this is true, and that is untrue. (25-27)

The entire poem is a reflection on good and evil, which *jest nam dane w samym biegu krwi* ["is given to us in the very coursing of our blood," 1]. It is a paean to the goodness of creation, because in a line with which even St. Augustine would find no fault, the speaker insists that "good is related to being, while the mirror of evil is nothingness," 8. He then moves on to the delight of beauty, which is wonderful precisely because "it has no right to be," 11. But when he continues on from here and begins to speak of good and beauty interchangeably, he shifts over, consciously or not, to the position of that great modern gnostic Nietzsche. For to compare good to anything, so far as to state that it can be identical with anything outside itself, even beauty, is to go "beyond good and evil," to render good irrelevant. The classical combination of good and beauty as *to kalon* has been made bankrupt by the very, bloody, twentieth century that Miłosz rails against, in which so much evil and cruelty has been displayed, and explained away, made palatable, according to dubious esthetic arguments. To give just one rather tame example: the canvases of the tortured Francis Bacon.

That gnosticism, whether naturally or strategically (remember Miłosz's comments on the inner orthodoxy he could not present to the world, offering instead more "shocking" fare in order to remain in dialogue with that same world) did enter into his poetic subconscious is proven by this very poem. Notice how the stanza cited above continues:

Or shall we rather say, that good is on the side of the living, / and evil on the side of annihilation, which waits in ambush, in order to devour us? / Yes, good is related to being, while the mirror of evil is nothingness. / And good is brightness, evil darkness; good is height, evil, depth, / according to the nature of our bodies, our language. (6-10)

"Good equals existence, evil equals nothingness" is a good Augustinian formulation. But when the speaker moves on to say "good equals light, evil equals darkness," this is pure manicheanism. And by suggesting that depths are evil, whereas heights are good, he continues his perhaps subconscious destruction of the traditional Christian teaching of God's creation, expressed in the Augustinian line above, which again is contradicted here, because *all* of creation is good. Evil is only a hole in that beautiful tapestry. We are not being facetious to suggest that the depths of the Grand Canyon are just as good and beautiful as the heights

of the Sierra—no matter what the speaker’s bodily nature or tongue might suggest.<sup>25</sup>

No different from anyone else, Miłosz was influenced by the books he read. Some of them, like the *Hymn of the Pearl*, leave us scratching our heads in wonder at what such an intelligent man could have found in this stuff to interest him. It is so much more easy to understand c’s addiction to *les romans policières* than Miłosz’s fascination with mumbo-jumbo like the *Corpus hermeticum*:

*Be thou more elevated than all elevation and deeper than all depths. Gather thee within thyself all contradictory characteristics, coldness and heat, dryness and fluidity. Think, that thou art simultaneously in all places, on the land, in the sea, in the sky. Think that thou hast not yet been conceived, that thou art yet in the womb of thy mother, that thou art a youth, that thou art an aged man, that thou hast died, that thou art in the world beyond the grave. Embrace with thy thought all of this simultaneously, all times and places, all substances and characteristics and greatnesses together. Then shalt thou be able to comprehend God. But if thou closest up thy soul in the body and wilt thus abase thyself, saying: I know nothing, I can nothing, I fear both earth and sea, I cannot raise myself aloft to the skies, I know not what I have been nor what I shall be—in that case, what hast thou in common with God? (792)*

The ungenerous spirit might see here an appeal to a certain megalomania, which we noted earlier: the attraction to squeeze oneself onto the throne next to God. After all, what does man have in common with God? Christ. And how did that commonality come about? By Christ becoming man, and not vice versa. But it can also be said that faux-mystical lines such as these dredged up from the discarded libraries of the past are more descriptive of finite man’s so overwhelming love for real, created nature that he wishes to encompass it all.<sup>26</sup> Surely it is no coincidence that this is directly followed by a pithy translation from Casanova’s *Memoirs*:

*There is not, nor can there be anything more dear for any sentient being than life... Death is a crank that tears the spectator away from the grand stage before the play, in which he is immeasurably interested, is over. (792)*

Nor that hence, in an odd sort of logic for one interested in gnosticism, we move on to the erotic verse “Annalena,” fronted by this citation from (*nota bene*) *L’Amoreuse Initiation* of Oscar Miłosz:

*It has so happened to me at times that I have kissed my own reflection in the mirror, because that face has been caressed by the hands, lips and tears of Annalena, and for that reason it has seemed divinely beautiful to me and radiant with a heavenly sweetness. (793)*

We are about to embark upon another extended consideration of erotic mysticism in the poetry of Czesław Miłosz. It may seem odd, as we note above, to see logic in the movement from gnostic thought, with its emphasis on spirit and light, to a discussion of sex, which deals with the body and matter. Yet we must remember that the gnostics did not reject sexual pleasure, only the fruit thereof. They did not abandon or eschew or forbid sexual coupling; they were only opposed to procreation, which, to their way of thinking, constituted the criminal entrapment of light and spirit in the dark and evil prison of the material body. Thus, they went to great lengths, Manicheans, Cathars and others, to assure that the reproductive act did not lead to reproduction.<sup>27</sup>

Is it therefore irony, in “Bogoboyny” [“God-fearing”], an aphorism from *Zdania*, for the narrator to exult: “So God heard my petition after all / and allowed me to sin to His greater glory”? Perhaps not—perhaps no more than Luther, another thinker marked in many instances by a gnostic bent, when he encouraged his followers to “sin boldly.” For note the following lines from so personal a poem as “Na pożegnanie mojej żony Janiny” [“In Farewell to My Wife Janina,” 1986, *Kroniki*], so personal that one almost hesitates to subject it to analysis.<sup>28</sup> In this poem we find, among other things:

I loved her, not knowing who she really was. / I caused her pain, chasing  
after my delusion. I betrayed her with women, remaining faithful only to  
her. (11-13)

In the context of a Catholic reading of these poems, how are we to react to line thirteen, if it is to be taken literally? This often-heard (these days) misogynist rationalization finds its ancient philosophical rationale in the gnostic doctrine of only the body being able to sin. According to this theory, which only works if we accept the radical dualism of the gnostic position, which splits body from spirit, one can do anything one wants with one’s body, without being called to task for it, as long as one does not sin with one’s soul. And thus the validity of at least one commandment is done away with.

Those who wish to see something more in Mozart/DaPonte’s Don Giovanni than an insatiable sex addict like to compare him to Goethe’s Faust. Don Giovanni’s thick black book, in which Leporello records all of



the erotic conquests of his master—sexual encounters entirely devoid of love, of arousal even, if that were possible—is the history of one mortal man’s heroic chase of the absolute, no different in quality than Faust’s imperative of action, even as he ascends into his grave, or the divine rivalry encouraged by the *Corpus Hermeticum*. This seems to be one of the things at the bottom of the eroticism expressed in Miłosz’s poetry, as he freely admits in this prose note from *Osobny zeszyt*:

Constantly waiting. Every day and every hour hungry. Staring at the face of every woman passed on the street with a cramp in the throat. Desiring not her in particular, but the whole world. With wide nostrils drinking in the fragrances of a bakery, of roasted coffee, of wet vegetables. Devouring in thought all foodstuffs and gulping down all alcohols. Preparing myself for absolute possession. (736)

Kim Jastremski buys this explanation. Miłosz’s sublimation of the animal erotic urge is fully and expertly summarized in the following paragraph from her “Home as Other in the Work of Czesław Miłosz:”

As “Esse” illustrates, women in Miłosz’s poetry often symbolize the unknown other, being one of the most obvious opposites of Miłosz’s typically male lyrical personae. Like Mickiewicz’s Zosia, women represent for Miłosz not only the typical feminine tropes of fertility and regeneration, but also a vision of the lost homeland, in that they carry the potential for a union of opposites and thus the connection necessary to transform the rupture of exile. While women are often found in the role of other in Miłosz’s poetry, they are symbolic of a much larger desire—the desire of the self to merge with other. Miłosz describes this desire, seen at work in “Esse,” as “a spasm in the throat, staring at the face of every woman passing in the street. Wanting not her but all the earth.” For Miłosz, the other is very often female, but in addition to being objects of sexual desire, their sex is representative of a larger metaphysical desire to blend opposites, to destroy the boundaries separating the self from other and find the passage from exile.<sup>29</sup>

That’s as etherial as one can get about it, I reckon. It might be more down to earth, though more banal as far as philosophy goes, to suggest that the desire to possess the female body is the desire to possess the totality of delight. In the long section from *Nieobjęta Ziemia* beginning with “Haftki gorsetu” [“Corset Clasps”], just after the translated *Epigraf* from Baudelaire “Constantin Guys,” the speaker again takes up this theme of “one woman—all women,” concretizing the universal:

I am conducting a serious operation. I am dedicated to it entirely, and for that reason I am liberated from the charge of transgressing social duties. When the bells of the Latin Quarter ring out for New Year 1900 I am the man who is walking up the Rue Cujas. The hand in the little glove grasps my arm, and the gas in the lanterns is hissing. Her body, which has already fallen into dust, is for me as desirable as it was for that man, and if I touch her in sleep she doesn't tell me that she has already died. On the verge of a great discovery, I have almost pierced the secret of the transformation of the Particular into the Universal and the Universal into the Particular. Thus I endow with philosophical significance the moment when I helped her to undo the clasps of her corset. (789)

In this way, as he puts it a few pages on, "I was engaged, laboring to pass beyond my place and my time, in search of that which is Real," 791. The universal, or ideal, can be reached by surpassing the ego and melding with the totality (a preoccupation that we have seen before). This may be accomplished in a variety of ways, this "becoming [fully] human;" for the writer of the following lines, it is mainly accomplished through sex:

Some people are already born humanified. At least so it seems to me, when I think of all the nameless saints and heroes of this century. Others must become humanified slowly, and this takes them, sometimes, whole decades. It is surely not my fault that, when I attempted to approach this goal in an elevated manner, I fell into falsehood and self-delusion. Trapped by my sensual nature, I could only experience melting into participation as one of the living through carnal relations. The triumph of the "ego" (am I not right?) allowed me to dispense with being enclosed in my "ego." (851)

He continues this thought in the very next prose note, in which honor is due God, and given Him, through and for corporal being:

Do I love God? Or her? Or myself? I don't know how to differentiate between these, and am, for this reason, ashamed—for it's not only difficult to admit this, but even to consider it in thought. My piety is, perhaps, the gratitude of a serene body, for breath, for the rhythm of blood, for everything. (851)

"Still I was unable to distinguish Him from the rhythm of my blood" the poet writes in line 21 of "Książdź Ch., po latach,"

And I felt something of a falsehood as I strove towards the other world in prayer. // I was not a spiritual person, but an incarnate person, /one called to celebrate Dionysian dances. (22-24)

One might say that this narrator cannot understand God at all. Not in the sense of a living Person, the ultimate commerce with Whom is the essence of life, the final goal of human existence. God, for the writer of these lines, is a distinct Person, the ground and guarantor of being, surely, but at the same time something of an unknown, never encountered financial manager, taking care of an immense trust fund which allows the narrator to live the carefree life of the wealthy, spoiled adolescent. Heaven, as it is described in “Jak powinno być w niebie” [“How it Ought to be in Heaven,” *Kroniki*], is a more intense, eternal continuation of this life. God, however, is absent from the picture, most likely because He is a spirit, He is intangible to the so very corporal speaker:

[...] I think that the movement of the blood / ought to continue to be a triumphal movement there, / of a more elevated, so to speak, degree. That the fragrance of gillyflowers and nasturtiums and honeybees and the buzzing bumblebee, / or their very essence, stronger than here, / must in the same manner call one to the pith, the very center / beyond the labyrinth of things. For how could the mind / cease in its chase, from the Infinite / deriving its enrapturement, its strangeness, its promise? / And where will it be then, our dear mortality? / Where will time be, which at the same time annihilates and rescues us? / Now I am out of my depth. Eternal peace / can not have mornings and evenings. / And that alone bears witness against it. / And theologians will break their teeth upon it.<sup>30</sup> (9-23)

In the poem “Anka,” we once again find the corporal imperative expressed in a meditation on a very erotically-inclined friend who has predeceased the speaker:

Rescued from the furnaces of the Second War, / trying on dresses before a row of mirrors, and blouses and necklaces and rings, / coiffed, painted for the struggles of her career, / a willing bedmate and conversationalist at wine, / the owner of a beautiful apartment with sculptures. / Left in these decades to the end of the world, / how is she making out, bodiless? (9-16)

Yet the focus is not so much on her as it is on the challenge that the feline scent, to borrow from Eliot’s Grishkin, tosses down before those who expound upon spiritualia. For

And the prophet does not personally address beings covered in a shawl / for their long hair would arouse desire / even to sunburnt fellows with beards, in long burnouses. /.../ And what could a prophet say without thinking of the hair beneath the shawl, / of the secret fragrance of oils and skin? (6-8; 17-18)

The challenge is an insupportable one if the “prophet” in question is identifiable with the speaker of “Wyznanie” (1986, from *Kroniki*), a poem with a strong title that can imply both a confession of a fault and a confession to a belief system. There, the eager body of Anka (as one woman and all women) constitutes the basis of all delight, all being:

Lord God, I liked strawberry jam, / and the dark sweetness of the female body. / As well as icy vodka, herring in oil, / and fragrances: cinnamon, carnations. / What sort of prophet could I be, then? How could the spirit / visit such a one? So many others / were justly chosen, believable. / But me, who could believe? For they saw / how I throw myself at food, toss off the glass to the lees, / and stare greedily at the neck of the waitress. (1-10)

In the very next poem of the collection *Kroniki*, but dated one year earlier, “Rozmowa o sławie” [“A Conversation on Fame”], this consumptive desire for woman, compared to physical hunger, is strongly underscored. In lines 3-5 of this poem, the narrator is amazed at the incomprehensible urge for fame on the part of some, who

For loud praise are willing to give up the delights / of a bloody steak, a woman’s bosom and even / ordering others about.

It would be difficult to find a more testosterone-filled three lines in all of literature. Delight, for the writer of these lines, is a bloody banquet of strong beef, the physical possession of a woman’s body, and the imperious joy of imposing one’s will on others. The tone is decidedly predatory.

One of Robert Hass’s most intriguing verse cycles, from his first book *Field Guide*, is entitled “The Pornographer.” It is a wonderfully subversive set of poems, in which the focus is not on the ancient Chinese artist’s morally equivocal vocation, but rather on his loneliness at being separated from his friends, his sensitive relation to surrounding nature, and so on. In this way, the very *métier* of pornographic painting is abstracted from its inherent turpitude, and the reader’s attention is focused, strongly and inventively, on fundamental human experiences. It is really a masterwork of inspired emotional misdirection, and one wonders whether the poet could have set our emotions humming so sympathetically for his character were it not for the red herring of the pornographer’s profession.

I think of this cycle by Miłosz’s friend and collaborator in this place, because it seems to me, at times like these, that Miłosz’s speakers draw uncomfortably close to the generally conceived definition of pornography. Do they not, in verses such as these, show us, not woman as a whole, but

rather mere female body parts? In our discussion of the spiritual content of Miłosz's poetry, given his often-displayed inner contradictions, his inner struggle between the spirit and the flesh, which pushes him at times inexorably towards dualism, can it not be suggested that this overmastering obsession with female corporality, with sex, leads him to overcompensate at times in favor of the spirit, and thus results in gnostic formulations?

The concept of initiation, in which ritual is not merely a symbolic act, but a process of arcane learning that ushers the neophyte into a higher state of contact with the *numen* (this frequently has the intellect as its medium), is a characteristic shared by all mystery cults. Gnosticism is no exception to this rule, and this is the main reason (passing by the absurd inauthenticity of gnostic scriptures) that it has always been rejected by the Church. Christ did not leave behind any "secret wisdom" to His "adepts." One needn't be particularly smart to be saved; indeed, one can be completely stupid, as long as one is good, humble, contrite and hopeful. It is interesting to note that how often the word "initiation," the Polish equivalent of which, *wtajemniczenie*, so much more strongly gives back the notion of an entering into the possession of occult lore, occurs in the poetry of Czesław Miłosz. In *Dla Heraklita*, it occurs in the very context we are dealing with now: sex. Here, the description of corporal love is the staircase over which the individual rises to a higher participation in physical reality. From individual Eros, one arrives at a pantheistic sort of Caritas:

Love philters endow in beauty and allure not only the face of the beloved, their magic endows trees, clouds, buildings, the perspectives of streets, a fuller being, which is mysterious, for Eros, the opposite of separation, appears in the role of a guide initiating one into pure beauty. It is easier to understand the moment of distance, which is introduced by the thought that we are mortal, that soon we shall be "stuffed into sacks, as they do with dolls," and that thus nothing of our puppet-like bustlings and ambitions are so important, but that much more important, perhaps, is the shape of a leaf or a sunbeam on the bark of a pine tree. (932)

This is no St. John expressing that God is love. For if it were, even physically expressed love, intimate and exclusive, would lead, not to beauty, as here, but to good. The arbitrary replacement of moral good by amoral beauty—wrongheaded ever since the bankruptcy of *to kalon*—once more leads the narrator down a mistaken path. For at the end of the meditation, and in contradiction to the Baroque poet whose lines he quotes,<sup>31</sup> he is led to a devaluation of the human person so as to no longer

be sure if an individual human life is more important than other beautiful, though inanimate, natural phenomena.

In the poetry of Czesław Miłosz we find a constant between two basically incompatible concepts in the erotic poetry: the Christian sanctification of our sexual nature through its ennoblement in an unbreakable, exclusive union of two people, one man, one woman, the basis and foundation of which is love, and the pagan, Dionysian, exaltation of sex, unfettered, as a quasi-religious act that initiates the individual into participation with the All. This tension leads the narrator, on the one hand, to moral jugglery (as above, where beauty is substituted for good), or to a redefinition of human nature according to the Christian scriptures the poet himself grew up on. This redefinition, arising in two separate places in *Nieobjęta ziemia*<sup>32</sup> and centering on a reevaluation of the Eden story, would posit that, not only is man not fully man without his body, but man is not fully man without sin.

That segment of the poem “Książdz Ch. po latach” that we cited earlier continues with these lines:

And disobedient, curious, on some step leading to hell, / easily seduced by the newest idea. // Hearing round about: experience, try, / dare, be free of guilt and sin. // And I wanted to try everything and understand everything / and the darkness was indulgent to me. // And so was I struggling against the world, / or unconsciously going along with it? // Aiding its Prince to tread with iron sole upon / the earth, which deserved no better fate? (25-34)

In reflection, the speaker wonders, was I not, in abandoning myself to this beautiful world, turning my back on the One Who created it, and entering into a league with the one who set it on its path to decay? Then, as if glancing to his side and noticing his woman, the anxiety disappears. He projects himself into the story from Genesis, identifying himself with Adam and her with Eve, *die Ewigweibliche*, and smiles:

And yet, no, my accomplice in sin, / you Eve from beneath the apple tree in the Garden of Delight. // I have loved your breasts and belly and lips, / but, how can I comprehend this, that you are different, and yet the same? / That convexity and concavity fulfill one another, / but you and I can feel and think in a similar manner? // That eyes see the same things, ears hear just the same, / and touch experiences the same earthly things? // Not one but two, not two but one, / A separate I, so that I would be conscious of myself in that way. // And that I should eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge with you, / and wander the winding paths of the deserts. (35-46)

Not only the Creation and Fall stories, but also the idea of exile undergoes a stunning revaluation in these poems. Is the author now over the pain of his banishment from Europe? Note the concluding section of “Raj” [“Paradise”], Part III of “Ogród ziemskich rozkoszy” [“The Garden of Earthly Delights”]:

Adam sits in astonishment. His feet / are touched by the feet of Christ, who has led Eve near, / holding her hand in His left hand, raising two fingers of His right / like a person teaching. Eve lowers her eyes. / Who is she, who will she be, that beloved / from the Song of Songs? That Wisdom-Sophia, / Seductress, Mater et Ecclesia? / He has created her, who will give Him birth. / How then did He come by His human form / before the years and ages even began? / In human form, did He thus then exist before the beginning? / And He created Paradise, but not entirely, / so that she would pluck the apple, she, the mysterious one, / at whom Adam is staring, uncomprehending. // I am both of them, double. I ate of the tree / of wisdom. I was banished by the archangel’s sword. / In the night I felt her pulse. Her mortality. / And from that moment we sought a real space. (15-32)

The inability of the poet to give credence to mere myths, which leads him to a novel appreciation of the physical reality of the Communion of the Saints in “Do Józefa Sadzika,” here leads him to prefer the exile of sin—the one tangible reality he knows—over the inexplicable state of prelapsarian innocence, enjoyed by our first parents.<sup>33</sup> He will have no truck with the ideal unless it be approachable through immediate, personal experience. Just as, due to their expression of ideal inner balance and calm, the faces of classical sculpture look so vacant as to seem moronic, so the author of these lines seems to feel that the rapacious lovemaking indulged in by Milton’s Adam and Eve after the fall was the first truly human, carnal experience, maugre what the English poet says about intimacy in yet-uncorrupted Eden.

This preferential option for the body, which is consistently displayed in Miłosz’s poetry, and which leads him to his very corporal description of heaven, discussed above, also plays into his views on the “poetry of the future.” What will it be like, he wonders, in *Nieobjęta ziemia*?

What will poetry be like in the future that I imagine, but which I will not experience? I know that it is possible, the poetry of the future, for I have known brief moments when it almost created itself beneath my own pen, only to disappear immediately. The rhythms of the body—the heartbeat, the pulse, sweating, the bleeding of the menstrual cycle, the stickiness of sperm, the position assumed when urinating, the movement of the bowels,

will be always present in it along with the elevated needs of the spirit and our duality will find its form without abdicating one sphere or the other. (802)

Thus the longed-for unification of sperm and spirit. But that is in the future, a future he is not to see, and the clear implication of this is that now, here, a choice must be made between the two; if there is “unity,” it is expressed in the gnostic tropes of duality. We will see how all this plays out in the last few volumes of Miłosz’s poetry in the next section of our discussion.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The full text of his address to the Royal Swedish Academy can be found in *Zaczynając od moich ulic* [*Beginning with my Streets*] (Kraków, Znak, 2006), pp.478-492; p.478.

<sup>2</sup> Separated into two groups, 1930-1936 and 1937-1944 in the *Wiersze wszystkie* of 2011.

<sup>3</sup> The second poem contains the concluding lines “And human independence is expressed / In this, that there is less bread to be had, and more iron.” Perhaps these sentiments, written in 1933, were deemed too explosive in the contemporary social system in Poland, in which food shortages played a role in the social unrest that led to the uprise of the Solidarity movement; there might also have been the chance of readers making an unintended, of course, association between that poem and Andrzej Wajda’s Solidarity films, *Man of Marble*, *Man of Iron*.

<sup>4</sup> As most of such prose sections are untitled, and it is unclear whether, as here, the paragraph is part of a larger whole such as “Świadomość,” or if it stands on its own, we identify their location in the collection by the inadequate method of noting page numbers. All page numbers refer to the 2011 *Wiersze wszystkie* published by Znak.

<sup>5</sup> George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc, 1949), pp. 251-252. The translated passage in Polish is found on p. 847.

<sup>6</sup> Venclova, p. 270.

<sup>7</sup> The Polish phrase jego dzieła can be translated either “its works” (i.e. the world’s works) or “his works” (the works of the “spirit of the vacuum, v.g. the devil). It is perhaps this second possibility that is the preferable translation.

<sup>8</sup> Paradoxically, perhaps, but the transformation of the soft, corruptible matter of the human body into the firm eternity of marble is also a spiritualization, an elevation to an ideal level.

<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, this may refer to a statue or icon of Jesus, and its location in space, as just one of a myriad of other “decorations;” on the other hand, this may refer to the “things He’s up against,” the things that are ranged against Him as He vainly strives to deliver His message to the modern world.



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<sup>10</sup> There may be an unintentional pun here, as the verb *wyłowić* is a common term for fishing.

<sup>11</sup> A title with at least two meanings in Polish: a) “The One [and Only],” b) “It’s all the same.”

<sup>12</sup> The Polish word *Rodzicielka* means “female parent,” i.e. “mother.” Literally, in its root *rodzić*, “to bear,” it means “She who gives birth.” It is used often in reference to the B.V.M. as in the phrase *Boża Rodzicielka*, as near perfect a translation of the Greek term *Theotokos* as one can get. In this way, Miłosz associates, potentially, the millions of our earthly mothers with the Virgin Mary.

<sup>13</sup> In Polish, *zła strona*, i.e. the “bad side.” This is actually proper Polish for the underside of a fabric; when you put your sweater on inside out, you’ve got the “bad side” uppermost. However, this is not to say that there is not an evaluative pun at work in the original Polish.

<sup>14</sup> The version of the poem given above, ending with “*pod diabelską władzą*,” is from the Kraków edition of *Nieobjęta ziemia*. The 2011 poem ends with “*pod diabelską władzę*.” If this is not a typographical error, the difference is potentially significant. The second version, an accusative clause, suggests that, because of the fall of man, creation was “handed over,” or “fell under,” the power of the devil. The first version, which we follow here, has the more gnostic overtones of creation by evil demiurge.

<sup>15</sup> Thus, a few pages earlier, when we read the aphoristic statement “The decent man simply can’t believe that a good God wanted such a world,” 877, we must not fall into the ironic trap set by the poet. Is this a rejection of God and His rule? Or is it not a challenge to us? Should we not rather concentrate on the verb “wanted” (or “wished for”) first, asking why it didn’t all turn out according to the original plan. Of course, as “*Teodycea*” and the fragment from *Shestov* remind us, why bother? Anyway, who is a “decent man” in the first place? Is he such as we should aim at becoming?

<sup>16</sup> Again we are presented with a case which makes the operative distinction between author and narrator impossible.

<sup>17</sup> Even more frightening is it an end-result. In Eliot’s essay, he spoke of modern culture (in England, particularly, but really throughout the West), as a civilization that only calls itself Christian, that goes through the motions of Christian ritual and pays lip-service to the civilization that Christianity has brought about, without any real, active, engaged conviction in the same, such as Fascism and Communism enjoyed at the time. It is a “neutral” culture compared to those two “positive” cultures, he argues—“positive” here not meaning “good,” but rather “vibrant,” and “capable of development and concerted action.” Cultures do not remain neutral for long. The culture of the West, he argued at the time, had better get on with becoming a revitalized positive civilization, or risk its eventual engulfing by one or the other totalitarian systems. The sad, frightening and indeed dangerous thing that Miłosz notes in his poem is that the triumph of England and the West over Fascism in 1945, and Communism in 1989, was not at all due to the vibrancy of Christian culture. These were victories of armed or economic might, and the soul

of the West remains just as sick, confused, and “neutral” (and therefore vulnerable) in 2009 as it was seven decades earlier.

<sup>18</sup> Or, on the contrary, the similarly pessimistic view that human solidarity is based, primarily, on death and suffering. Just such a postulate brings the later poem “Na plaży” [“At the Beach,” from *Dalsze okolice*, 1991] to a close. Observing with compassion the care with which a “beautiful,” perfectly formed father watches over his mentally retarded child, plodding clumsily along the shoreline, Miłosz reflects: “Experiencing the misfortune of others pierces me through and then, thinking of them, I begin to understand // The commonality of our fate in this dark century of mine, and the more real, then ever I wished to admit, speechless community of suffering,” 26-27. We will consider this verse again in the next section of our discussion, dealing with the works of his final years.

<sup>19</sup> Not that he ever stopped doing so. However, it is our contention that much of his early California verse is concerned with himself as dislocated person; his eye is directed inward. At or about 1980, he more frequently looks toward Europe to consider her problems, the problems of society, the problems of others.

<sup>20</sup> If we can assume the existence of a single “meta-narrator” behind the poems written in the first person, without recourse to dramatic personae.

<sup>21</sup> Consider Eliot, writing in *The Idea of a Christian Society*, on the very brink of World War II: “What is more insidious than any censorship, is the steady influence which operates silently in any mass society organised for profit, for the depression of standards of art and culture. The increasing organisation of advertisement and propaganda—or the influencing of masses of men by any means except through their intelligence—is all against them. The economic system is against them; the chaos of ideals and confusion of thought in our large scale mass education is against them; and against them also is the disappearance of any class of people who recognise public and private responsibility of patronage of the best that is made and written.” p. 32.

<sup>22</sup> See again Eliot, in a somewhat kindred tone, in his notes to *The Idea*: “One of the causes of the totalitarian State is an effort of the State to supply a function which the Church has ceased to serve; to enter into a relation to the community which the Church has failed to maintain.” p. 53.

<sup>23</sup> The trouble for the *critic* of Miłosz begins when, despite this characteristic of his background, Miłosz *rejects* its postulates and conclusions.

<sup>24</sup> The line might also be translated: “Call them to their senses” (with the reflexive pronoun *siebie* referring to the people, not beauty).

<sup>25</sup> We are reminded of the great John Muir, writing in his *Grand Cañon of the Colorado*: “A noted writer, comparing the Grand Cañon in a general way with the glacial Yosemite, says, ‘And the Yosemite—a, the lovely Yosemite! Dumped down into the wilderness of gorges and mountains, it would take a guide who knew of its existence a long time to find it.’ This is striking, and shows up well above the levels of commonplace description; but it is confusing, and has the fatal fault of not being true. As well try to describe an eagle by putting a lark in it. ‘And the lark—ah, the lovely lark! Dumped down the red, royal gorge of the eagle, it

would be hard to find.' Each in its own place is better, singing at heaven's gate, and sailing the sky with the clouds."

<sup>26</sup>Even if, reading the challenge "then you will understand God" from an anachronistic Christian viewpoint, we read this passage as the expression of a philosophical impossibility, a reflection on man's smallness.

<sup>27</sup>Miłosz was both aware of, and seemed to approve of, the contradictory attitude of the gnostics toward the body and sex. As he writes in "Wychowanie katolickie," "The authors of the textbook stridently condemned the orgies indulged in by certain Manichees as a weapon in the 'struggle against the body,' but I was not convinced. For I quite understood this mental leap: if we are in the power of Evil, we should act in spite of it, submerging ourselves in it as deeply as possible, in order to hold ourselves in the greatest possible contempt", p. 38.

<sup>28</sup>The critic just can't win here. "What do you know about Miłosz's relationships with women?" one might angrily toss up to us. The answer to that is, just as much as he wants to tell us, publishing such a personal, confessional verse, again, *so much indicative of the first person* that it is impossible to separate author from narrator.

<sup>29</sup>Kim Jastremski, "Home as Other in the Work of Czesław Miłosz," in Bożena Shallcross, ed. *Framing the Polish Home. Postwar Cultural Constructions of Hearth, Nation, and Self* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2002), pp. 26-53; p. 33.

<sup>30</sup>There is another description of the new heaven and earth in a prose fragment from *Nieobjęta ziemia*, "Zmartwychwstanie..." ["Resurrection..."]: "Resurrection. All things tangible, material, as one says, are changed into light and their shape there is retained. After the passing of our time, in meta-time, they return like thickened light, although not thickened to the state of previous matter. By an incomprehensible force they are pure essences. And the essence of every human being without 'growths,' age, sickness, lipstick, disguise, pretense" 875]. Both more Augustinian (return to ideal state) and gnostic (matter as thickened light) than what we have just considered, but matter-oriented just the same, as "essences" themselves become concretized by an "incomprehensible power."

<sup>31</sup>Mikołaj Sęp-Szarzyński.

<sup>32</sup>And thence becoming a Leitmotif in his later poetry, as we shall see.

<sup>33</sup>Heresies are many, and none are completely unique. Still, the emphasis that Miłosz places on God's connivance in the disobedience of Adam and Eve, something that Milton writes an entire epic to disprove, makes me wonder if, in California, Miłosz had any meaningful converse with Mormonism. The presence of Latter Day Saint theology in Miłosz's American poems is a topic that may some day yield curious insights into his poetry.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### A CHAPLAIN OF SHADES: BERKELEY, KRAKÓW, MIŁOSZ'S FINAL YEARS

With Poland's self-liberation from Soviet-imposed communist rule in 1989, life changed dramatically for Czesław Miłosz. He began visiting his homeland with more frequency, eventually accepting an apartment in Kraków bestowed upon him by the city, to which he moved and where he would live out the last years of his life. Five more volumes of poetry were to emerge from his pen: *Dalsze okolice* [*Regions further Afield*, 1991], *Na brzegu rzeki* [*On the Banks of the River*, 1994], *To* [*It*, 2000], *Druka przestrzeń* [*Another Area*, 2002] and the posthumously published *Wiersze ostatnie* [*Last Poems*, 2006], all of them published in Kraków by Znak, including the first in this series, which was originally scheduled for publication in Paris, and which the Instytut Literacki generously offered Znak as the first of Miłosz's poetic volumes to be published in fully independent Poland. To these should be added several more uncollected poems, and the poems published in *Piesek przydrożny* [*The Little Roadside Dog*, 1997].

The abandonment of Berkeley for Kraków, at first only for summer visits, although later forever, is the only major departure of the poet's final years. One looks in vain for the philosophical shift to the composition of works "more in line with Catholic orthodoxy," of which the poet speaks in his surprising letter to the Pope. Instead, as far as the spiritual expression of his verse is concerned, one finds more of the same. Take, for example, the poem "Jak mogłeś" ["How could you"] from the 2002 collection *Druka przestrzeń*, so full of religious themes as to be something of a final, "theological" statement of the aging poet. The speaker of this poem is "unable to comprehend" how God created such a world,

Alien to the human heart, merciless. / In which monsters copulate and death / is the mute guardian of time. // I simply can't believe that You wanted this. / This had to have been some pre-cosmic catastrophe, / the victory of an inertia stronger than Your will. // The wandering rabbi, who called You our father, / that defenseless man before the laws and beasts of

this earth, / shamed, despairing, / may he aid me / in my prayers to You.  
(2-12)

T.S. Eliot once stated that poets should write little. This makes sense, insofar as it means that they should be their own best editors, and mark for publication only the very best of their efforts. No wiser advice was given to poets than that of Horace, who admonished them to lock away their work for nine years. Only after such a passage of time, will a writer achieve the proper perspective to successfully winnow the grain from the chaff. It doesn't seem as if Czesław Miłosz followed that advice, even metaphorically. There is little new in his later work; what we find, indeed, is a revisitiation of old themes, with no real reason to go back. The poet's mind, instead of developing in new directions, seems to fold back on itself. What, really, is the excuse for publishing this sort of dimestore philosophizing? This shaking of the fist at the Almighty? Especially since Miłosz has already "been there." We have already seen him "do that." And even the teeth-gritting petition to the "wandering rabbi," which shows him still desperately struggling with, clinging to, his faith, is old hat. If Ezra Pound says that literature is news that stays news, reading Czesław Miłosz's later poems is often as inspiring as reading yesterday's newspaper.

Yet our picture of the great Lithuanian would not be complete without a consideration of these final volumes, and thus we move on to their interpretation, trying to discover, if we can, what moved Miłosz to his declaration of orthodoxy, and, perhaps, the diplomatic, measured response he received from John Paul II.

The older Miłosz gets, the more devoted he remains to the primacy of reality. "Kuznia," ["The Forge"], the first poem in the collection *Dalsze okolice*, ends with a familiar self-description: "So I look on, I look on. To this was I called: / To the praise of things, because they are," 13-14. Similarly, the poem "1 Grudnia" ["December 1"], from the same volume, which provides us with a verbal snapshot of reality:

A reddish land of vineyards, rusty, carmine-brown at this season of the year. / The blue silhouette of mountains above the fertile valley. / Warm as long as the sun is out; while the cool returns with the shadows (1-3)

concludes with the poet reaffirming his love for what exists, in contrast with his impatience at theoretical speculation: "I describe this all, because I have come to doubt philosophy / And the visible world is all that remains after its destruction," 7-8. This would seem to be his guiding matter as artist.

It is what he affirms in his “Przypis po latach” [“Note, After the Passage of Years”], in which he sums up his poetic career as of May 2001:

My Catholic upbringing inculcated in me a respect for all visible things, which connects that feature of being most worthy of wonder, that is, *esse*. I think that the health of poetry is its striving toward the capturing of as much reality as is possible. If the choice were between subjective and objective art, I'd choose the latter, although, what it might be, no theory will reveal, but one must search for the answer oneself, in one's own workshop. I hope that my practice confirms my basic choices.<sup>1</sup>

The mention of his option for “objective” over subjective art is surprising, given the constant, first-person, “Miłoszevian” narrator so familiar to us from his earliest poems. As we have earlier noted, Miłosz is hardly ever the Williamsian observer of the detached, amber moment. His attachment to reality, physical reality, has been a frequent theme on our pages, but that reality has always been seen through the eyes of a narrator that, if not Miłosz himself, most often is a narrator with a similar *Weltanschauung* to his own. In other words, it is impossible to imagine Czesław Miłosz writing anything as detached and objective as “The Red Wheelbarrow.” Still, despite his earlier Manichean leanings, it is telling that Miłosz attributes this love of reality to his Catholic upbringing. Perhaps this is that filament that runs through his poetry which leads him to his latter affirmation of the “catholicity” of his poetry? In a poem dated November 29, 2002, beginning with the words “W Wilnie kwitną bzy” [“Lilacs are blooming in Wilno,” *Wiersze ostatnie*], the narrator reminds himself of the duty to rein in the dash to abstract speculation, and remain faithful to the clarity of the real, observable object:

Careful, Miłosz. According to Thomas of Aquinas, in what you write / there ought to be *integritas, consonantia, claritas*. (7)

Yet would he remain faithful to this? Was he careful? It seems not. The pull to gnosticism was ever too strong for him, as we shall see. But at least he was no Docetist, as we may infer from “Karawełe” [“Caravelles”], the fifth verse in the strange cycle from *Druga przestrzeń* entitled *Książd Seweryn*, the persona of which is the eponymous Catholic priest who has lost his faith:

So that a man soaked in blood from so many wounds / might be declared God and the ruler of the universe, / this took insanity—proof enough of the fact / that our species reaches out for the impossible. // To thus set man in the center of the cosmos! / And to send out armed caravelles bearing the

sign of the cross on their sails / for the garnering of lands and seas. / [...] But the man from the little town of Nazareth, the perpetrator of all this, was no spirit. / His body, stretched out on the tree of shame, really did suffer torture; / something we strive to forget every day. (1-7; 9-11)

No, Miłosz will have nothing to do with those who seek to deprive Christ of His corporal existence. Whoever He was, whoever Miłosz understood Him to be, He was no phantom. But is this all that he can say about Him? In these lines, Miłosz's speaker not only effectively deprives Christ of His divinity, he also places Him at the center of what can only be read as a senseless, smug cosmic plot, and His oblation on the Cross, at the focal point of it all, was but a shameful sacrifice to our pride.

Or it can be something else. In a manner which both recalls to mind Octavio Paz's criticism of seventeenth-century Spanish culture's obsession with eschatology to the detriment of the present world,<sup>2</sup> and the tendency of Miłosz's early verse to confront contemporary Christians with the exigencies of Christian behavior here and now, Miłosz is fascinated with the Cross, and its relative significance. In "Niemożliwe" ["Impossible"], a short verse from the volume *Piesek przydrożny*, we read:

The mystery of the Cross rests on this, / that a disgusting instrument of torture was made into a sign of salvation. / How is it that people don't consider what it is that they flaunt in their churches? // May the fires of punishment consume the foundations of the world.

Miłosz's narrator doesn't want to consider the cross in its paradoxically triumphant nature. While not particularly rejecting that truth, he grabs us by the sleeve, as it were, and says "answer me this first," and then proceeds to a disquisition on the truly horrifying role played by crucifixion in the penal systems of the classical and early modern world. In other words, rather than pointing to what God has done for us, in accepting such a death for our sakes, he confronts us with the question: How is it that we, people like us, ever came to think up such a horrible machine? How is it that our kind could ever even consider nailing living flesh onto wood? Again, the onus is deflected, in a not-unchristian manner, away from eschatological hope, to contemporary praxis.

To his credit, Miłosz does not simply point the accusatory finger at others. In an earlier verse from the same volume, "Blisko" ["Nearby"], he produces a very Catholic statement on personal responsibility and accountability:

It seems a long time from that Springtime, when he walked the roads of Galilee, / Yet it isn't so long ago. / There, I asked him, "Have mercy on me, a sinner." / And I keep hearing: "Where your treasure is, there also will be your heart."

In other words—especially understandable to the Catholic, with his acceptance of the doctrine of good works—"show me by your actions that you deserve mercy, and don't just expect both salvific grace and a *carte blanche* for willful behavior here below."

To return to the verse at hand, as we have said before, Christianity, and especially Catholicism, is a religion based on physicality, one that does not reject the material world created by God and sanctified by His Incarnation. At this point, the physical, tactile impulse of Miłosz's nature meets with the Christian tradition. "Druga przestrzeń," the poem which introduces the collection of the same title, makes this abundantly clear. It is yet another meditation of Miłosz's upon the nature of the Other World:

Have we really lost our faith in that other area?<sup>3</sup> / And both Heaven and Hell have disappeared? // How can Salvation be met with, without the meadows of the beyond? / Where will the union of the damned have its office? // Let us weep, let us lament the great loss. / Let us daub our faces with coal dust, let us undo our hair. // Let us pray that the other area / will be returned to us. (7-14)

Miłosz's narrator is here the spokesperson for all traditional Catholics, all traditionally-minded Christians, who are more in tune with the holiness of physical existence than many of the official theologians of the Church, who are so metaphysical in their statements of theological truth as almost to negate reality in favor of some misty, completely spiritual (and therefore gnostic!) understanding of eternal reality. "Niebo" ["Heaven"], a 2003 poem from *Wiersze ostatnie*, is fronted with just such a windy excerpt from the Polish translation of the newest Catechism of the Catholic Church:

Our Father, who art in heaven.

The expression: "Who art in heaven" does not signify a place, but the majesty of God and His presence in the hearts of the righteous. Heaven, the Father's house, constitutes the real Fatherland, toward which we strive and to which we already belong.<sup>4</sup>

For Miłosz, this sort of super-philosophical dithering can be understood as an attack on the good, solid foundations of Christianity, which again, through the ages, emphasized the importance of physical



reality and history by virtue of Christ's entrance into that physicality, that real history:

The saints and the prophets, the builders of temples, the wise men and the poets were all lying, fooling themselves. // We do not have, nor have we ever had, a Father or a home. // The cry of the generations awaiting mercy rose above the wilderness and died away in a vacuum, and they all went beneath the earth along with their delusion. // Tragic masks, tiaras, liturgical robes mildew in the peat like the bones of a mammoth. // That's what I was thinking, but I was conscious all the while that it was the voice of Nothing addressing me thus. (5-9)

It is almost as if we hear St. Paul speaking in the lines of the poem:

And if Christ be not risen again, your faith is vain, for you are yet in your sins. Then they also that are fallen asleep in Christ, are perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. (1 Cor. 15:17-19)

For as the verse continues:

Against this both my flesh and blood rebelled. / And they led me on a long journey among people. // How many times did I feel love and anger, disgust with them, gratitude and adoration. // Their weakness warmed me, their strength supported me, / they were with me in my dreams and watchings. // If it were not for them, I would have been defenseless. Gazing at them, I composed hymns in praise of beechwood boats, mirrors of smoothed metal, aqueducts, bridges and cathedrals. // Everything by which is expressed our similarity // To the Ineffable, our Father in heaven. (10-16)

Again Anselm: the magnificent wonder of *our* reality and the reality of the splendid world of men and nature argues eloquently for the reality of our Maker, its Maker, and our continual, real, tangible existence and communion with Him.

It is this same logical approach to faith, that animates the speaker of "Religia Helenki" ["Little Helena's Religion"] from *Piesek przydrożny*. Although she attends Mass, she confides to us: "I don't listen to what the priests prattle about in their sermons, / Because in that case I'd have to abjure common sense," 3-4. Although the poem ends in rather trite, well-worn tropes:

It's not for me to pronounce upon what Hell and Heaven are all about. /  
But there is so much horror and ugliness in this world, / That there must be  
truth and goodness somewhere, that means, God must exist (8-10)

it is another Anselmic verse, arriving at Anselm's classic proof. Since an unfanciful absolute can be imagined, it must exist; since it obviously does not exist here, it must exist, *and really*, somewhere else. Somewhere else there must be that "second," *real* space.

This reality of the world extends to punishment, as well. In "Zdarzenia gdzie indziej" ["Happenings Elsewhere"], from *Na brzegu rzeki*, the poet imagines the first minutes after death of a poor sinner named Adamek.<sup>5</sup> At first, it seems unreal. The devils who assail him have all the attributes of dream-beings, or characters in a comic opera:

They were dressed in black, with red snouts. / They mocked Adamek  
horridly, / sticking him in the sides with their little pitchforks / (And they  
were such small ones, for handy occasions like this). (4-7)

But he is not destined for Hell. Suddenly, a being that can only be an angel, although attired "in a homespun jerkin, in long boots, / with a shotgun over his shoulder," 28-29, delivers him from their clutches. He leads him, not out of a dream or to Heaven, but to Purgatory. The fact that he leads Adamek to Purgatory, that second realm of the saved, the existence of which is called into doubt by Protestants and so many modern Catholics, is itself a clever emphasis of reality. With "Heaven" and "Hell" so often little more than metaphorical trappings in modern parlance, reference to Purgatory, paradoxically, becomes a statement of the poet's acceptance of the whole traditional doctrine of what lies beyond the veil. Note too how realistic is the description of that place—far more humanly graspable, even, than that given by Eliot (as many infer) in "The Hollow Men:"

You'll be with the Hospitalers. Among the bedsores, / the odors of rotting  
flesh, howls, / and pain crying to heaven for vengeance / that every day  
give the lie to divine goodness. / In other words, the cruel cosmic  
vaudeville is performed there, / differing from Hell in this, that it is not  
'nothingness,' / but a constant endurance and suffering. / They named it  
Purgatory. You will serve there, / carrying, washing, cleaning, hearing /  
and day after day you will come to recognize your guilt, / until you come  
to the conclusion, that you do not deserve any better." // And the  
messenger set out up the steep hill. / Adam followed after, for he did not  
know the road himself. (34-46)

Despite the odd, Hardyesque mention of Adamek's continued existence as the continuation of the "cruel cosmic vaudeville," which can also be taken to signify that all which is not final union with God in Heaven is not fully "real," a didactic sort of playacting, it is noteworthy that the punishment that Adam will endure in his purging is a realistic counterpoise to his sin, as in Dante; also worth pointing out are the last two lines of the poem in which the narrator once more underscores the inevitable order of the universe, the hierarchy of moral law, no less stringent than physical laws which all creatures must obey.<sup>6</sup>

As we have seen, Miłosz emphasizes the continued reality of objects in time, as well as their tangible extent in space. These considerations are continued in the last five volumes of verse he was to publish. If something has once existed, can it ever cease to be? His narrator re-states this question, rhetorically, in "Fotografia" ["Photograph"], from *Dalsze okolice*:

Was she like a cloud / or the billow of a river / returning / to nonbeing? //  
Or, conversely, / is she still substance / that means, enduring / personally  
and eternally? (17-24)

Is he really asking for an answer here? Or is it a didactic, rhetorical question? If there is only one narrative voice in those of Miłosz's lyrics not possessing a dramatic persona, he gives the answer outright in a poem from *Na brzegu rzeki*, aptly entitled "Realizm:"

And so I pass into those landscapes, / beneath a cloudy sky, from whence a  
sunbeam shoots, / and in the midst of the dark plains the stain of a shining  
glows. / Or to the shore of the bay, where there are cottages, little boats, /  
and smaller figures out on the yellow craft. / This is eternal, because it  
once was, / existing for a moment, and then disappearing. (14-20)

This verse, like several others of this period, which recall the interests of Zbigniew Herbert, refers to Dutch painting. But it is much more than a mere reflection on the eternizing qualities of great art. For as we have earlier seen, a much more certain eternizing record is that kept in the living mind of the living God, and this is continued existence of quite a different quality. In "Powiniem teraz" ["I ought to, now"] from *Druza przestrzeń*, the speaker links his calling as realistic artist, for lack of a better term, with *le grand rouleau d'en haut*. The connection has important sacerdotal implications:

All of you, with whom I fell in love, approach; forgive me / my sins on account of my having been dazzled by your beauty. // You were not perfect, but for me, the shape of those eyebrows, / that very tilt of the head, that speech, both coquettish and restrained / could belong only to perfect beings. /.../ Their incomparable bravery, sacrifice, and dedication / have passed away along with themselves, and no one knows about them. / No one knows for all eternity. // When I think of that, I am in need of an immortal Witness, / so that He alone should know and remember. (8-12; 19-23)

As it is not the priest who performs the transubstantiating miracle at the consecration, but God working through him (indispensable as the priest is, however, as the unique link between God and His people); as it is not the priest who forgives sins in the confessional, but God, who bestows the absolution on the penitent through His human instrument (and yet there is no sacrament without that human instrument), here too: Miłosz, the artist, preserves for us the past reality of these women through his art, but he would be unable to do so, were it not for that Witness, who preserves them, not artificially, but ontologically. This truth is rendered gracefully in the 2003 poem, or sketch of a poem, published in the posthumous *Wiersze ostatnie*:

Facing Him, / we have received a new sight, and are able / to gaze at the Sun. // Was this not always / our greatest desire, / to live eternally and abide in brightness? // [...] // The past, present, and future / have united in one kind-of-time. // What was, what is, and what will be / have turned out impossible to differentiate. // At last we have understood our life, / with everything that happened in it. (1-6; 9-14)

What is it that we have finally realized? That it is not time that is important *per se*, but rather the significance of time, and of acts performed in time, in a temporal medium sanctified by Christ, by a God, who is both beyond time and of time, who surpasses the world He created, yet deigned to become of that world firstly by His irruptions into the history of His chosen people, and secondly, how much more perfectly, through His Incarnation, that point in time to which all time is oriented. In this poem, Miłosz comes, briefly, close to Eliot, and close to a Catholic conception of history.

However, Miłosz differs from Eliot, among other ways, in this too: that whereas Eliot, with his distrust of Romantic aesthetics, fosters a less “personal” voice (emphasized also by the splendid objective correlative), Miłosz, on the other hand, heir to Mickiewicz, embraces the personal voice and the poetic “I.” This goes a long way to explaining his obsession

with the expression of tactile experience in his poems, so different from Eliot's emphasis of reality. This obsession with tangible reality, so desperately emphasized throughout the Milosovian canon, leads the poet to an expression of the layering of time, which we have seen before, as in "Młodość" ["Youth"] from *Dalsze okolice*:

The red-head, who causes you so much torture, / she seems so beautiful to you, is a doll in the conflagration. / You do not understand what she is screaming with the mouth of a puppet. /.../ The house, which you approach with trembling, / the apartment, which dazzles you, / Look: on that very spot the cranes clear away the rubble. (14-16; 20-22)

It also leads him, as we have seen before, to an understanding of the reality of the Communion of the Saints, a community of mutual aid,<sup>7</sup> which becomes ever more important with the human agent's declining powers to act, as corporal action becomes ever more improbable. "Późna starość" ["Advanced Old Age"], a text from 2003 contained in *Wiersze ostatnie*, expresses this, despite its rough, self-deprecating humor:

It's over now, getting up in the morning / with prick aloft, / which leads and points the way. // [...] It's time for pious readings, / to grab ahold of some sainted person, / for example, Blessed Cunegunda, / and hang suspended like a wood shaving over the abyss. / And she, in turn, holds onto the hem of St. Francis' robe / and thus united in a garland we arise aloft. (1-3; 6-11)

And thus the question posed in the above-cited stanzas 5-6 of "Fotografia" is answered fully, in its concluding lines:

And, incomprehensible: / I turn to her / completely certain / that she hears: // "Handmaid of the Lord, / my betrothed one, / with whom I was to have / twelve children. // Beg for me the grace / of your strong faith. / The living are weak / without your care. // You are for me / the mystery of time / that is, constantly different / yet the same person // who runs through the garden / fragrant after the rain / with a ribbon in her hair, / and lives in the other world. // You see how I am striving / to reach in words / that which is most important, / and how unsuccessful I am. // Although, maybe this moment / when you are near / is your aid / and forgiveness." (53-80)

In a very pleasing way, Miłosz's poetic practice—the eternizing of the real past, with its never fading moral import for the present—which can only be accomplished, it seems, through the "intercession" of those who have passed becoming present to him again, becomes a metaphor for

reality itself, i.e. the present moment inextricably set against the background of eternity, which it incessantly enters and becomes.

Now, Miłosz is neither Eliot nor John Donne. With his well-documented devotion to corporal man—at times, as we have seen, to nearly bestial man—we cannot expect him to remain in these heights for too long.<sup>8</sup> The pull of the flesh is too great, too exhilarating the delights of the body for him not to indulge in them, for their own sake. In one of the least successful of his later poems, “Rozmowa” [“Conversation”] from the *Dalsze okolice* cycle “W Yale” [“At Yale”], Miłosz suggests that, after the tiring struggle with history, man must return to his elemental, essential being: sex, food:

And so humanity returns to its favorite pastimes / during the great recess.  
Taste and touch / are dear to it. Cookbooks, / recipes for perfect sex,  
schemes / for lowering cholesterol, methods / for quick weight loss—are  
necessary to it. (12-17)

This attachment to the body, so pronounced throughout his poetic career, becomes more and more pronounced as he ages. In stanza (or verse) two from the eponymous cycle “Dalsze okolice,” his narrator virtually declares the Erotic to be the essence of life:

2. Peace? Come off it! Dragged against my will, / in terror, that he will  
presently abandon me, / he, who decorated each day in colors, / oiled the  
muscles and suggested the words. / Never before has Eros seemed so  
tyrannical to me, / and the land of the new generations so eternal.

This takes us to the confessional lines of “Rozmowa z Jeanne” [“A Conversation with Jeanne”], dated December 1984, Guadalupe, and collected in the same volume:

You're right, Jeanne, I don't know how to take care of the soul's salvation.  
/ Some are called, and others make do as best as they can. / I accept that,  
everything that has happened to me, has been just. / I do not pretend to the  
dignity of circumspect old age. / Untranslatable in words, I have taken up  
my abode in Now, / in the things of this world, which are, and therefore  
delight one: / the nudity of women on the beach, the brazen cones of their  
breasts, / hibiscus, alamanda, red lily, devouring / by the eyes, lips, teeth,  
guava juice, juice of *prune de Cythère*, / Rum with ice and syrup, liana-  
orchids / in the wet forest, where trees stand on the stilts of their roots. (16-  
26)

It is debatable whether these lines, especially the first, are ironic, or heartfelt. Miłosz is, after all, not deprived of that desperate Christian faith, which he will return to again. Yet although he is not one to be incognizant of our battle with the spirits of the air—a struggle so movingly reflected in individual poems such as “Odstap ode mnie”—the narrator’s physical humanity takes the upper hand in this verse, as it does so often. In poems such as this, where no crisis is present, the speaker, feeling his oats, comes close to acknowledging Dr. Faustus’ theology of *che sarà, sarà*. Do your best, and let the chips fall where they may. The “do your best” part is quite Christian, in a Pascalian sort of way, but what these lines suggest is far from what ever Pascal had in mind. For if the speaker is serious here, and not ironic, what does complete immersion in the real moment of Now signify, other than a total abandonment to luxury?

If there are only two themes in all of literature: love, and death, and if we were to sum up in as succinct a manner as possible just who Czesław Miłosz was, as a poet, we would not be far wrong to suggest that he was the singer of the mortal and the erotic, and *basta*. This is how the narrator defines himself in the poem “To,” which opens the collection of the same title:

To say, for once and for all, what is sitting inside me. / To scream out:  
 People! I have deceived you / saying that this wasn’t in me, / when THIS is  
 there always, in the day and the night. / Although it is actually thanks to  
 this / that I was able to describe your flammable cities, / your short loves  
 and games crumbling away into dust, / earrings, mirrors, the straps of  
 dresses sliding off the shoulder, / scenes in bedrooms and battlefields. (1-  
 9)

It is the same old story, we learn, as we read on to the end of the poem, as old as our kind. The sexual act, and the poet’s obsessive interest in it, is conditioned as a feeble, desperate response to the finality of death: “Because THIS means coming into contact with a stone wall, / and the understanding, that that wall will not be moved by any of our entreaties,” 26-27.

Pessimism again, countered only by the Dionysian. This is all right for a Nietzsche, all right for a Lawrence or a Swinburne, but is it proper for the Christian poet? Miłosz, like a planet hovering in the vacuum of doubt, is pulled now into the gravitational field of the New Dispensation, now back into the frightful pagan darkness, the only positive content of which are the phallic mysteries, the idol of which is the eternal feminine.

Miłosz's narrator confesses to his *zwierzęcość* ["bestiality"], as he terms it in "Wbrew Naturze" ["Against Nature"], from *Druga przestrofa*. The poem, which begins with the gauntlet tossed before Metaphysics: "Much misfortune has resulted from my faith in God, / Which was part of my imaginings of the splendiddness of man," 1-2, develops as a meditation on what man is called to be, in opposition to what he, at least, is able to become:

Man, not taking his bestiality into consideration, / should have a rich spiritual life, // acting in accord with motivations counted / among the elevated and noble. // He would then be worthy of respect, having become nearly angelic. (3-7)

This is not the cloth the speaker is cut from, nor that of the martyrs, whom he mentions a few lines down. No,

And I? Was I to be worse? Was I to look upon myself / as if upon a lesser being? // Unfortunately, I found in myself only the appetites of a dominant bull, / and energetic spermatozoon. // Honestly, all I ever wanted was strength, and fame, and women. // So I began fabricating within myself feelings of love and self-sacrifice. (10-15)

It can be suggested that Miłosz's delight with corporality, despite his self-revealing confessions of a consumptionary nature, derived from the artist's delight with the visual world. Yet there is an easily discernible titillation beneath it all that has a voyeuristic quality to it; Miłosz's appreciation of female pulchritude has something in common with the Boudoir artists of the Rococo, such as Boucher. In "Pastele Degasa" ["Pastels of Degas"] from the volume *To*, he finds a kindred spirit in the nineteenth century French artist:

And he pages through the fashion magazine. Her shirt / of muslin, a generous white roundly shines through / and pinkish nipples. The painter's hat / hangs in the hallway among the dresses. / He liked to sit here, talk with them, draw. / Our human interaction has a bitter taste to it / because of the familiar touch, greedy lips, / the shape of the hips and teachings of the immortal soul. / It swells and ebbs. The wave, the wool, the billow. / And only a reddish tuft of hair shone in the abyss. (12-21)

Again we have the dismemberment of the female body, this time as a painful reminder of the inexorable passage of destructive time. All that remains—the clot of stray red hair—powerfully conjures up before the poet's eyes the whole woman once desired, never possessed, now gone



forever. A similar effect is achieved in “Trwałość” [“Endurance”] from *Dalsze okolice*, in which the shadowy voice of a voluptuous café singer remains in the narrator’s memory as the one, indestructible fragment of an irretrievable past:

And that song, her throat, a pulsing stem, / unforgotten through so many long years, / her dancing movements, the black of her hair, the white of her skin, / the imagined aroma of her perfume. / What did I learn? what did I come to know? / States, customs, lives, all passed away. / No trace of her or that café remains. / And only her shadow with me, fragility, beauty, always. (10-17)

If the Erotic is the ground of being for Miłosz, Woman is solidly at the core of that erotic principle. Like the poets of a matriarchal society, like the ancient worshippers of “the goddess” and her modern devotees like Robert Graves, Czesław Miłosz’s personae venerate woman, under all her aspects, carnal and spiritual, as the vessel of a higher wisdom closed to man, a being more in tune with the natural world than her confident, ill-fitting male consort. Consider, for example, “One” [“Those Women”] from the same volume:

Their names will not be remembered. / The darners of frayed sweaters, the guardians / of socks and linen, [...] *amantes*, bed partners, lovers, / seductresses, homemakers, wives, / all able to bear grand ideas with patience, / plans to change the world, faith in genius, / bearers of a secret of which he has no idea, / smiling, they make tea, / move to the window, water the plants. (1-3; 7-13)

This poem bears, biting, the dedication *Feministkom* [“To the Feminists”]. Miłosz, it seems, did not abide the militant women’s-rights battalions, who strive so to ensconce the idea of gender equality as to blur the distinction between the sexes, and wash femininity out of the female.<sup>9</sup> Here, in stating that the names of these strong, humble “helpmeets” will never be known (in contrast to the de Beauvoirs and Steinems of the world), he underscores their elevation over the men they seem to “serve”—their anonymity a more elevated state than notoriety, which simply means recognition by the culture created and dominated by men. They are possessed of a higher wisdom, which enables them to patiently bear with the grandiose notions and idealistic claptrap offered by their mates, much as one generously smiles and nods the head at the wild fantasies of children. They know better. And not only would the world be ruled better, if it were ruled by women, it actually *is*, through the influence they exert upon their husbands, their brothers, and their sons.

In such a way does Miłosz etherialize what is at bottom an erotic fascination with the other sex, as he expresses it in lines from "Nieprzystosowanie" ["Unadaptability," *Druga przestrzeń*]: "I did not love woman with my five senses; I only wished to see in her our sister, as she was before our exile," 6.

Of course, there is a limit to sublimation. This adoration of the female reminds one of the prostitution cults of antiquity. There too, whatever the philosophical rationalization for the act, whatever the spiritual aim of the "ritual," we have at the bottom of it all pornographic, exploitative, rather adolescent sex. All of this is contained, for one good example, in the following lines from "Uczciwe opisanie samego siebie nad szklanką whiskey na lotnisku, dajmy na to, w Minneapolis" ["An Honest Description of His Own Self, over a Glass of Whiskey at the Airport, let us say, in Minneapolis," *To*]:

I see their legs in miniskirts, jeans or in airy fabrics, / peeping at each one of them individually, their rear ends and their thighs, lost in reverie, gently rocked by pornographic dreams. / You dirty old granddad, time for the grave, not for the games of youth. / Not true, I do only what I've always done, weaving the scenes of this world at the command of an erotic imagination. / It's not these very creatures I desire; I desire the all, and they are as if the sign of ecstatic communion. / It's not my fault that we've been so molded, half of disinterested contemplation, half of appetite. (2-7)

The keyword here, I think, is *honesty*. For in the poem "Wanda," from *Na brzegu rzeki*, addressed to his acquaintance the applied artist Wanda Telakowska, when we come across these lines surprisingly in support of monogamy:

We never entered into any sort of romance with one another. / Traveling, we always took separate rooms, because sex is diabolic. So I believed, / and so I continue to maintain. And whoever / thinks otherwise, gives himself over / into the power of the Spirit of the Earth, who is not good. / You can do "it," but only with one's own wife. / And anyway, Wanda, you were no temptation. / Big, huge, and rather unpretty (13-21)

the sarcasm is thick enough to cut with a knife. Here too the narrator is being honest—perhaps unwillingly, subconsciously so—for his support of the Christian matrimonial ideal here, the eschewing of adultery, does not arise from an inner conviction, but rather because the plainness of his companion does not arouse him to unclean thought.

Are we being too harsh? It is a fair question. But consider “Mara: Wielość” [“Nightmare: Multiplicity”], a later poem collected in *Wiersze ostatnie*. This is the sort of succubus that visits the speaker at night:

She appears at night, formed / from various substances, colors and names. / A little bit Krystyna and a little bit Teresa, / with a touch of Zofia, a pinch of Magdalena. / She works in a firm somewhere. / Wears a white dust coat. / The others, hairdressers and manicurists, / don’t like her. They’ve just given her a piece of their mind: / “You’re only pretend, you aren’t real. / You’ve got nothing within you, *nothing, nada.*” / Maybe that’s true. (1-10)

She is something of a troubadour’s *donna ideale*; like them, she is a composite female made up of the most attractive body parts (*nota bene!*) of the narrator’s female acquaintances. Like the “goddess” of the prostitution-fertility cults, she is a whore:

Is she mine or not? / She’s here with me, it seems, but she tempts others too. / She has drawn the attention of the preacher, / who slavers all over her, publicly, in the café. / And his woman, with a scream, with tears, / rushes over to beat her. (10-15)

His or not his? A more pertinent question is what, or whom, does she represent? As the poem develops, we begin to wonder about this, as she shares little with the usual image of the deified woman, whose attribute is not sterile erotic beauty, but fertility, the cornucopic womb. Not her:

All the while she / talks about a certain medical clinic, / the director of which, a nice old mammoth, / sometimes gets the suction out, for his friends. / (After all, he was once her husband). / She’s going there again—I don’t ask why. (15-20)

The poem ends in contradictions that are hard to untangle:

A great sorrow eats at me, but coupled with anger. / “Is it my child or not,” I scream. “I won’t allow it!” / Above the earth, from the stars paling in the dawn, / a sound courses, grows loud. It’s the silence talking. / *In excelsis*. Forever. Blessed. (21-25)

Why is the narrator filled with anger? Because she is off to an abortion clinic? But didn’t he just say that he’s “not asking why” she’s going to that certain physician, as if he didn’t want to know, as if what he doesn’t know can’t hurt him? And if he is upset at the possibility of her terminating the child, as he suggests in line 22, is he protesting the murder

of an unborn child *per se*, or just the “termination” of his own? Can such a moral distinction be drawn? And if the narrator “will not allow” the abortion to take place simply on the grounds of it being *his* child and not *a* child,<sup>10</sup> is not all attention, once again, focused on him, all the import in the world contingent upon him? In this case, it seems that what the speaker adores is not *die Ewigweibliche*, the eternal female, but the release of sperm, the orgasmic rush, which need not, after all, have a female receptacle.<sup>11</sup> In the end, not only is the worship of women expressed in the poems of Czesław Miłosz amoral and unchristian (his narrator here is shown to be just as a-moral as his amoral composite goddess, in the end), it is juvenile, prurient, whatever it might suggest in a Don Giovannish way about the insatiable drive toward the absolute.

We have more than once spoken of the reflexive tendencies of Miłosz's verse, according to which even poems that begin in reference to others, living or dead, seem to circle round back to their real protagonist, the first person narrator. In connection with the present verse, it is interesting to consider “Yokimura” from *Piesek przydrożnego*. In it, the female narrator, with whom “I identified myself with, for a moment,” visits the grave of her unborn child. The child seems to have been aborted, as in line two the narrator speaks of “[the terror] of life on earth, which I have spared you”]. From this beginning, the poem continues in a Hardy-esque vein of it “better not to have been born into such a world,”<sup>12</sup> as she says “then, I felt relief, telling myself that you, at least, are safe,” 6. The poem ends with the curious lines:

I made a decision and know that this was how it was supposed to be. And  
I blame no one for what I've done. // When I taste a peach, when I look at  
the rising moon, when my heart is cheered by the young cedar forests on  
the mountains, I experience it all instead of you, in your name. (11-12)

One almost wants to snort, “Gee, thanks, Mom!” To see the poem develop into a study of a woman who can't, really, come to terms with what she's done would require a strong tussle of convoluted back-psychology, especially considering line eleven. Whether or not line twelve is supposed to be an illustration of continuing sorrow (again, playing the devil's advocate, against the grain), it is nonetheless striking that the focus again comes round to the woman, the narrator, leaving the child “safe” in that cold crib.

To return to the male-driven erotic poetry, *Dalsze okolice* is rife with expressions of the insatiable drive to possess, absolutely. Verse 12 of the cycle “Dalsze okolice” brings the series to a conclusion with a confession that sublimates voyeurism:

12. I'd like to be able to say: "I am sated. / What ever there was to be experienced in this life, I have experienced." / But I am like the man who timidly parts the curtains / to gaze upon an incomprehensible holiday.

His overwhelming thirst for experience is such that even vicarious participation must suffice where real participation is impossible. In "Dom filozofa" ["The Philosopher's House"], a prose meditation that takes up pp. 1039-1040 of the volume as it is collected in *Wiersze wszystkie* (followed by a "commentary" stretching to p. 1041), the drive to absolute possession is explained on the basis of the ever curious human intellect's ability to sympathetically span time and lose itself, as above, in the "incomprehensible holidays" of others:

Considering that privilege of the mind, he grew amazed at its dissimilarity to the body, which is soon to die, but also at its greed, that is, the mind's greed, which will never be sated. Because the more he wishes to possess, the larger grows that which escapes him. And from this contrast between striving and accomplishment arises the piety of philosophers, at least of the philosophers of that school, among whom he would like to count himself. (1040)

Immediately, he is moved again to consider the persistence of history in memory as evidence of the existence of the eternal repository of the past, which is the mind of God:

Can it be possible, he asked, that this spectacle of an ungraspable plurality of forms, of which each endures only in its own proper point in time, is it possible, that this spectacle that makes us catch our breath in wonder, should be presented for no one at all? Is it possible that the mind, which has an insatiable desire for detail, did not in this display its kinship with the absolute mind, the witness present in each moment of the time-space continuum? Truly, such a theater must have an audience, although the actors are not conscious of it, just like the blade of grass is not conscious of the human eyes that look upon it. Let us then repeat the maxim, more important now than ever: *esse est percipi*, to be, means to be noticed. (1040)

This last scholastic comment invites us to branch off into other questions, not the least of which might be, is the speaker here not attempting to associate himself, more strongly than he admits, with that godhead he refers to? Is not the role of the observer (him) magnified by its elemental role in upholding the existence of the beings and objects he perceives, and thus, is not the interest of perception reflected off the object

to redound, and more selfishly, to the perceiving subject? Can the world continue to exist when he shall leave it? We will forgo these questions for now, and consider them later, when we come to look at how the mind of God is understood in the “commentary” to this poem.

In the poem “Dante” from the same volume—odd in that Miłosz’s frequent dictum of “one woman = all women; all women loved = one, primeval woman” is a contradiction of Dante’s Christian ardor of one real individual for another, real individual—the poet concludes his meditations with these lines on perpetual thirst:

And only one thing is true, just as it was for you: / *La concreata e perpetua sete*, / natural to us and constant, the thirst / *del deiformo regno*—of the god-formed region, / land or kingdom. For there is my home. / I cannot help it. I pray for light, / for the center of the eternal pearl, the *aeterna margarita*. (28-34)

Again, we will see that, far from being in agreement with the great Florentine, Miłosz sets himself up, consciously or not, as something of an anti-Dante. But we quote these lines in testimony of that all-consuming thought of his, which will not allow him to be satisfied with merely winning the pearl, no, he will be restless until he wins that which it hides within itself. We are free again to ask: is this a chase after the absolute, or one more expression of gnostic probings for “hidden” treasures?

But it is not all about mere possession. In “Uczestnik” [“Participant”], from the same book, his narrator speaks of the chase for the absolute as an exercise, not merely in expanding the ego, but in sympathetic comprehension of myriad others: “In everything that is common to us, the living, I am submerged, / Experiencing this earth for others, in my own body,” 7-8.

In “Historie ludzkie” [“Human Stories”], a 2003 poem collected in *Wiersze ostatnie*, he develops this thought in the direction of his prophetic, bardic role as (one might say) metaphysical historian:

Their lives are like waves, when they crest and smash down on the shore. / Lord God in the Highest! / Do not leave them in the abyss, without Purgatory and Hell, / wandering the labyrinth. / Put on my lips the words of a prayer / for us, for them and for me, / who was to describe them, / but didn’t. (21-28)

He desires here to be a voice speaking for others<sup>13</sup>—a characteristic that both recalls to us the claims of inner orthodoxy (when exactly is he speaking for himself?) and the earlier poems on his myriad women,

including that succubus. Is whoring used as a metaphor of the multivocal vocation of the poet? It might also be seen, we are forced to suggest, as a perverted metaphor of God's omnipresence and omniscience.

For indeed, in considering the God we find in Miłosz's poems, or, rather, the varied conceptions of the Deity in Czesław Miłosz's verse, we see that Miłosz's speakers often set themselves up as rivals of that God much more frequently than as His worshippers. In unguarded moments, such as that found in "Modlitwa wigilijna," the adult persona is forgotten, and the speaker allows himself to sing in the tropes of a childish, folkish faith he dismisses in other places. In poems like "Odstęp ode mnie," where push comes to shove, he seems like the proverbial atheist in a foxhole, turning his eyes heavenward as the slugs begin to whistle about his ears. When he feels sure of himself—and we find this in quite a few poems of the later period—he can be ironic, clinical, even sarcastic about the idea and Person of God. In poems such as "Medytacja" ["Meditation"] from *Dalsze okolice*, we have a curious, unexpected attempt at hacking God down to size:

Lord, it is quite possible, that the people singing your praises were mistaken. / You were not a ruler on a throne, to whom prayers and the smoke of incense arise from the earthly vales. / The throne, which they imagined, was empty, and you smiled a bitter smile / seeing how they turn to you in hope, / that you will preserve their corn from hail and their body from sickness, / that you will deliver them from plague, hunger, fire and sword. / A traveler, halting by unseen waters, you upheld a little lamp in the darkness / and in its tiny flame, consumed in thought, you shook your head. (1-8)

It is one thing to pose the question, "Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people," and quite another to suggest that it is because He is unable to aid them in distress, when He would choose to do so. The stated question can lead, perhaps, to an unsatisfying discussion on the *mysterium iniquitatis* (have we not already visited this before, and come to the conclusion that some questions are better not posed?); the stated answer given by Miłosz's speaker is surprisingly naive, unnaturally silly, at least as silly as many of the imaginings of theologians and pious souls that he bats away with a smirk:

You wanted so to help them, glad when You were successful. / Feeling compassion for them, forgiving their mistake, / their falsehood, of which they were conscious, pretending to know nothing about it, /and even their ugliness, when they crowded into their churches. / Lord, my heart is full of wonder and I wish to speak with You, / for I think that You understand me,

despite my contradictions. / It seems to me that I know now what it means  
to love people, / and why we are hindered in this by loneliness, pity and  
anger. (9-15)

The way that the narrator conceives of his Anything-but-Omnipotent in these lines—exactly the way the pagans castigated by the much greater intellect of St. Augustine conceived of their petty godlets, this one able to help out at childbirth, but impotent in thunderstorms, etc.,—is neither interesting enough or mature enough to elicit serious comment, nor shocking enough (and this surely was Miłosz's strategy here) to waste ink on. It seems, as the poem drags to a close, that Miłosz's narrator wishes to take his common human denominator of suffering and extend it even past Christ to the Impassible:

It's enough to consider one life, strongly and continuously, / the life of one  
single woman, for example, as I do now, / and the greatness of these so  
weak beings will become apparent, / who know how to be upright and  
brave, patient to the very end. / What more can I do, Lord, than remind  
You of them, / and stand before You, bowing like a petitioner, / begging,  
on behalf of their heroism: accept us into Your glory. (16-22)

Passing by the contradictory idea of the “glory” the speaker deigns to impute to this impuissant character he has created—unless he is using the term sarcastically<sup>14</sup>—it seems that Miłosz, who in his earlier-noted rivalry with God has sometimes sought to magnify himself and squeeze himself onto the majestic Throne, here is operating in the opposite direction: pulling God down to man's level. The testified pettiness of man, *imago Dei*, demands a petty God.

Miłosz's problems with understanding the Christian concept of God, if there was a simple answer to be arrived at, seems to lie in his overturning of the God-human relationship. Somewhat similar to Marlowe's Faust, who is unable to distinguish magic from religion,<sup>15</sup> in his verse Miłosz often conceives of God not as a Supreme Being to Whom man owes gratitude, honor and service, but as a powerful servant, Whose worth is constantly scrutinized according to the criterion, “What have you done for me lately?” This position is so unpalatable, that Catholics find themselves more in tune, not only with the complete handing of oneself over to God enjoined by St. Ignatius Loyola, but also with Jean Calvin's theology of the tyrannous God, Whose “cruelty” in predestining souls to Hell redounds at least to the glory of His omnipotent, unfettered majesty.

“Sens” [“Sense”], a poem from the same volume, is a three-stanza work based on the thesis-antithesis-synthesis model we have seen before.



In the first stanza, the thesis is stated: something glimpsed before in an overcrowded airport:

When I die, I shall see the underlining of the world. / The other side,  
behind the bird, the mountain, and the sunset. / The challenging, real sense  
of interpretative reading. / What did not agree, will agree. / What was  
incomprehensible, will be comprehended. (1-5)

In the next stanza, we find the opposite idea, the philosophically valid, negative option:

And if there is no underlining to the world? / If the thrush on the branch is  
no sign at all, / merely a thrush on a branch; if day and night / follow one  
another without a care for the sense of it all / and there is nothing on earth,  
besides this earth? (6-10)

The two thoughts are mutually exclusive, and thus difficult to synthesize. One option, the Pascalian option, is to choose between the two, based on self-interest. Miłosz's narrator, however, *does* find a synthesis, and a striking one at that:

If that's the way it was, there would still remain / the word once awoken  
by unending lips, / which runs and runs, an untiring messenger, / through  
the interstellar fields, through the spinning wheels of the galaxies /  
protesting, calling, crying. (11-15)

Either God exists, or He does not. Either He is the ground and guarantor of being, or being is senseless. Either man is immortal, or he is not. How can man's continuing existence, his cry of protest, resound if, as Miłosz's speaker puts it in line eleven, the postulate of stanza two is correct?

Not to be facetious or over materialistic about it, the best we can say is that Miłosz has his cake and eats it too, thanks to *technology*. Lines 12-15 can be understood scientifically as well as metaphorically. Television signals, for example, are "eternal." Broadcast into the ether, they will go on forever, until they are received somewhere else. Thus, man's hopes and dreams, his protest and his triumph, the record of his having once been, will continue on, potentially *ad infinitum*, long after every trace of him has been effaced from this planet... thanks to TV. The only problem with this is that, alongside Miłosz's televised performance of "Campo di Fiori" and Martin Luther King's speech at the Lincoln Memorial (to reference an overused American example), *I Love Lucy* and *Survivor* and *WWF Smackdown* will also make up that equivocal testimony of man's

nature. So, not only is Miłosz hacking eternal life down to a mechanical process so much more demeaning than Petersen's dream at which he chuckled in "Za Urąłem," the eternity proposed by Miłosz, and ABC, A and E, the Shopping Channel, etc., is one of mutually antagonistic transmissions of humanity, in which good is canceled out by bad, heroism by farce, beauty by the disgusting.

Far-fetched? Not entirely. Consider that commentary to "Dom filozofa," to which we referred earlier:

And thus, paradoxically, the twentieth century turned the philosopher toward the idea of the Eye (let us recall the eye in the triangle), being the eye of the universal witness, and even, who knows? the super-custodian of the universe, or the possessor of an absolutely perfect, for taking in all things through its lens, film camera. Although ancient philosophers meditated upon the omniscience of God, unable all the same to unravel the riddle of Providence, none of them ever took as their exit point certain characteristics of our mind, powerfully aided by technology. The Most Exalted was humanified, endowed with human feelings and a human will, but no one ever tried to bestow upon Him the passion of the TV reporter. (1041)

This really is too much. Miłosz, like all of us, is a creature of his age, and is shaped by the culture it was given him to flourish in. It is not odd that the idea should occur to him. However, I would suggest that it is indicative of careless thinking to make this statement without regard to its consequences. For in reducing the idea of the living mind of the living God as a guarantor of the reality of the past to the dead eye of the all-registering camera as appropriate to the twentieth century, Miłosz suggests that our understanding of the truth of Who God is, is a culturally-conditioned thing. Thus, setting revelation aside, it is subjective—there are "many paths" as post-modernists would have us believe. The reason that earlier generations didn't conceive of God in this way—poor fools trying to "unravel the riddle of Providence"—is because their *technology* had not yet arrived at the level at which the reality (camera) could be invented and thus give rise to the literary/theological metaphor. This can be taken to suggest that earlier ideas of Who God is (mainly derived from revelation) are cultural constructs no different from this of Miłosz's. In this way, whether he means to or not, Miłosz calls into question the simple reality of Christ, and the supra-cultural, supra-historical sense of the fact of His salvific death.

In this curious little metaphor of God as the universal supermarket-shoplifter-cam, Miłosz unwittingly does homage to Orwell's Big Brother,

whom he earlier sought to protest against using the traditional idea of an omniscient God as the *living* repository of historical truth.

“Dom filozofa” is the penultimate verse in the collection *Dalsze okolicie*. As befits the subjective, post-modern view of truth it contains, Miłosz leaves the last word in his spiritual meanderings to “Zen codzienny” [“Everyday Zen”], a group of translated Zen *koan*, the significance of which, as spiritual exercises, is by definition anti-intellectual and completely open to subjective interpretation (as discouraged as that, generally speaking, is, by the Zen tradition!)<sup>16</sup>

Against the argument of techno-cultural development, we would assert that the camera-age perspective *was* used before the twentieth century. It is, formally speaking, the most engaging aspect of Thomas Hardy’s gigantic, Napoleonic closet drama *The Dynasts*. Never meant for the stage, this poetic masterwork, with its cinematic didascalica, now showing long-shots of Europe from an atmospheric distance, now “zooming in” on the human ants his protagonists, in *The Dynasts* Hardy has created a work that begs for filmic realization, years before the industry was even conceived. And there, in Hardy, as here, in Miłosz, the camera-eye perspective is humbling, chastening to man; there, as here, the mind or consciousness behind the lens is just as cold and dispassionate, or at least impuissant of aid, as the machine that registers the images. The difference lies in the fact that Hardy did not identify himself as a Christian.

The reference to Hardy is not haphazard. Miłosz is just as much a product of the nineteenth century, that age of crude scientific application, as he is of the frightening twenty-first, speeding towards dehumanization through scientific tinkering. Flashes of Hardy, appearing by design or coincidental osmosis, appear in Miłosz’s work. Consider the poem “Głowa” from *To*. It begins with a huge otherwise unidentified head rising over a calm river, where a little boy is fishing, intent on the bobber on the surface of the water:

“What’ll we do with him,” the head wondered, / as he doled out tasks to the spirits of the air, / who specialize in the working out of fate. // Years pass, and then: “Well, sure,” the head said to itself, / at the same place by the same river, gazing at that boy, / now become an old man, who returned here after long journeys. // “Some people imagine / that they themselves decide things, and fulfill them. / This one knows, at least, / that he was the plaything of giggling forces / swimming about in the air, / and is only astonished at the fact / that his life turned out as it did. (6-18)

Again a reduction of God, a dismemberment—here He appears as nothing more than a head—or the sentient sunrise, or some supernatural

“Witness” who looks on poor striving man with ironic pity—themes familiar to readers of Hardy’s poems from verses such as “Nature’s Questioning” or “The Subalterns.”<sup>17</sup> Miłosz does, in his doubting, seem similar at times to Hardy, or even more so, to Matthew Arnold, as we meet him in the lines of “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse.” “Wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born, / With nowhere yet to rest my head” (85-87). Yet it was William Blake who, of all English authors, influenced Miłosz the most. Whereas Hardy and Arnold, in denying God,<sup>18</sup> or doubting in Him, equally doubted in the supernatural evil of Satan, Blake, re-writing Scripture (*nota bene!*) rejects, or radically redefines, the Person of Christ, only to embrace the “energetic” evil one. How odd, the books that fall into our hands, by chance, as Blake’s fell into Miłosz’s...

To return to the idea of the reduction of God to human pettiness, such an element can be found even in the poem that Miłosz wrote for the Pope of whom he was later to beg a *nihil obstat*. Lines 23-28 of “Oda na osiemdziesiątę urodziny Jana Pawła II” [“An Ode for the Eightieth Birthday of John Paul II,” *To*], read:

How to answer the question, how is it possible / that young people from  
unbelieving countries adore You, / crowding together on squares shoulder  
to shoulder, / waiting for the good news two thousand years old, / and fall  
at the feet of the Vicar / who has embraced in love the entire human race.

How ironic the phrasing of these lines, which almost play into the semi-jocular stereotype of Polish Catholicism, in which “First comes the Pope, then the Virgin Mary, with Jesus running a distant third.” A man is shown here, almost as if he were receiving the *latreia* due God; the Viceroy, as if accepting regal praise, and stated so matter-of-factly as if the speaker saw nothing amiss. And why? Not because of the holiness of his subject, his relationship to the God he represents, but because of his humanity:

You are with us, and from now on you will always be with us. / When the  
forces of chaos take voice, / and the possessors of the truth shut themselves  
up in churches, / and only the doubting remain faithful, / your portrait  
hanging on the walls of our homes will remind us, every day, / what one  
man can do, and how sanctity operates. (29-34)

Lines 31-32 are quite eloquent of Miłosz’s theological ideal. An extreme individualist chary of all authority, he will have nothing to do with the magisterium—the “possessors of truth,” he sneers, “will shut themselves up in churches,” assuming a cowardly defensive posture against

the world, whereas “only the doubters,” like himself, “will remain faithful.” To whom, or what, it is difficult to understand. Unless he means faithfulness to the very action of doubting, a constant, endless search for truths fortunately out of his reach, for the process is all, the end result anti-climactic, and thus better not arrived at. We are reminded of his dream of heaven as a continuation of this life—a constant striving, never the possession of any sort of beatific state or vision, of which he would quickly tire. Of course, the most amusing thing in these lines, passing by his characterization of a fortress-like Church—(where has he been since 1965, when the Vatican knocked down so many of the bastions separating it from the world?)—is his assertion that John Paul II will remain with him and his doubters, *outside* the Church he was chosen to lead! Only the most cynical of sedevacantists would nod his head in agreement here, and certainly Miłosz was not of their number.

The theme of the “exclusive” faith of the doubters is found throughout Miłosz’s poetic corpus. In these latter volumes, it is the central motif of “Obrzęd” [“Liturgy,” *To*]. As he finds elsewhere a common human denominator in suffering, here he justifies syncretism on the basis of our frail human understanding, which is unable to grasp the great tenets of faith:

But yes, Berenice. Not so much “more peace of mind,” / as tolerance for  
oneself and others. // One mustn’t require virtues of people / for which  
they were not created: / the harmony of ratiocinations, beliefs / not  
contradictory, the agreement / between works and faith, certainty. (1-7)

One is struck with the shallowness of thought reflected in lines like this. Like so many armchair theologians, Miłosz’s narrator is confused by the relationship between Christian faith, based on revelation, and human reason, based on logic. He has no problem with Augustine’s *Intelligo, ut credam* as he, and so many others, would withhold belief until empirical proof has guided them by the hand past its threshold. But no such proof can be given for the Divinity of Christ, the virgin birth, the Holy Trinity, the corporal resurrection of the dead, and so on—the list is nigh endless. Again like Hardy before him, Miłosz’s narrator is unable, or unwilling to accept the second half of Augustine’s statement, *Credo, ut intelligam*. And thus he finds, not only modern civilization, but himself as well, unable to believe, unable to grasp Christianity, being himself beyond the pale of the Age of Faith:

This is us kneeling in our church, then, / amidst columns crowned with  
golden acanthus / and decorative angels, whose thin trumpets / announce a

message too great for us. // Our attention span is short, Berenice says. / My thought returns, in spite of the liturgy, / to the mirror, the bed, the telephone, the kitchen; / unable to bear the city of Jerusalem / as it was two thousand years ago, and blood on the Cross. (19-27)

That “good news” is too far beyond our comprehension, too foreign to our everyday experience, which blinds us to anything beyond it; the blood of Christ on the Cross is not understood here in its supra-historical significance. Rather, it is seen as messy evidence in a judicial crime that Berenice recoils from in disgust. She is the victim of a false syllogism: to adore the Cross is to adore capital punishment, and so she walks away from the first, because she will have no part of the second. If Berenice is a representative of modern Western culture, it is easy to see why there is no room for Christ at the motel.

And so the poem ends equivocally, ambiguously, both as to speaker and what is spoken, but with a reduction to the most basic grasp of physical reality:

“You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the earth,” / He said, and called us to His glory, / the victor of the laws of the earth, subject to no man. // I know that he called us, Berenice says. / But what about the doubters? Do they bear witness, too, / When they are silent out of love for His name? // Perhaps we should begin worshipping stones, / ordinary field stones, their very Being, / and pray,<sup>19</sup> not opening our lips? (37-45)

How exactly is it possible for the agnostic to witness to Christ? By remaining silent (as he says in the verse “Jeżeli nie ma” [“If there is no,” *Druga przestrzeń*] where “one may not sadden one’s brother,”<sup>4</sup> with the news that God does not exist, even if that be “true”) and not taking part in theological discussions to which one can add nothing meaningful? If so, this is one “commandment” that Miłosz’s narrators continually break. By simply “being,” just like the stone, by not taking oneself out of existence and proving one’s continued, real existence, the fact of one’s having been created, and thus, remaining an indirect proof of the Creator’s existence? Perhaps—in one of his poems, Miłosz has already suggested “salvation” won by simple endurance in being.

Who is the speaker of the final three lines? Are they a continuation of Berenice’s statement in the preceding stanza, or are they the narrator’s reply? In a sense it doesn’t matter, as their uncommented-upon placement as the “final word” of the poem logically leads us to assume that they have the narrator’s approbation.

What is of more moment is the option they suggest—the “adoration of the simple field stone, its very existence.” Unless the speaker is smirking at Berenice here, offering her a sarcastic, Socratic option in response to her question, this is the greatest reduction of all—from Triune Christianity to the most elemental, primitive animism. We have already noted how Miłosz, in his meditations on the story of Adam and Eve, posits the *felix culpa* in a necessary scheme of broadening human experience, of making our kind fully human, through the freely willed option of sin.<sup>20</sup> In this—rebellion as divine energy—Miłosz’s narrator is quite the disciple of Blake. But if he is serious here, and means to suggest that a religious attitude based on so very a fundamental appreciation of real, created nature that a man or woman is justified in symbolically doing homage to a field stone as an acknowledgement of reality, and that this is preferable to an assent to revealed truths that surpass the human capacity to understand, then he has fallen lower than even Milton’s Eve. For she, after tasting the fatal apple, at least worshipped a tree...

Again, this is Miłosz calm, Miłosz sure of himself. But it is only one step away from despair and nihilism, and when the black dog bites him, as it does his narrator in the poem “Na plaży” [“On the Beach,” *Dalsze okolice*], where he reclines on the hot sand “on this European shore, in full Summer, after the great wars of the century,” 2, he falls into the abyss. Just like the absurdists, toward whom he had earlier preserved an ambivalent attitude, the fact of Europe learning nothing, Europe picking up where it left off after so many tragedies, moves him to consider whether or not there is anything transcending this material existence at all:

By the screech of their music (rock was pulsing), I searched for what was at the center of my thought. // Is it all one, that one thing, which nothing can express, simply bawling “aa!” day after day, / an unrecalled, indifferent, eternal passing away? // Sorrow and anger that, after ecstasy, despair and hope, oblivion will engulf beings similar to gods? // That in the rustling and silences of the seas one cannot hear any message concerning the separation of people into the righteous and the unrighteous? (8-12)

and the very fact of their return to the old ruts of custom, under the old dispensation, where, as he was to put it later in “Rozbieranie Justyny” [“Undressing Justyna,” *Na brzegu rzeki*]:

And wax flows down like icicles, and people do business, and whales disport off Lahain, and the ungrateful generations build their homes, and the French policemen have been issued new capes, and the sun rises once more and... (43-46)

leads him to doubt in the existence of justice, and see beyond bright, irrational life, only the black awaiting:

A flock of pigeons swings over the valley, veers and changes color sweeping along the range of mountains. // That same praise of ordinary days and milk in jugs and crisp cherries. // And yet down below, in the very underpinnings of being, as if among the roots of the forest, waits in ambush, crawls along // relentless, steel-gray nothingness, recognizable from the fluttering terror of the little creatures. (18-20)

Despite the obligatory distinction, when possible, between poet and narrator, despite the claims of “inner orthodoxy” vis-à-vis the imperative of speaking to a faithless world in a language it can comprehend, and despite the teeth-gritting will to believe that we continually come across in Miłosz's poetry, I do not think it an exaggeration to suggest that despair is at the very foundation of Miłosz's creative expression. He really does seem to mean it, in the aforementioned “Obrzęd,” for example, that the truths of Christianity are too sublime for weak man's comprehension:

Our attention span is short, Berenice says. / My thought returns, in spite of the liturgy, / to the mirror, the bed, the telephone, the kitchen; / unable to bear the city of Jerusalem / as it was two thousand years ago, and blood on the Cross. (23-27)

Is this a contradiction of the earlier poem (Lecture V) from *Kroniki*, where he pins the “believer” against the wall with his inescapable challenge on the real meaning of the Resurrection for those who call themselves Christians? Or does the inability to comprehend lead logically to an inability to assent (as we have posited above), and if so, is Miłosz here giving his honest answer to the question: Did He arise, or didn't He?

That certainly seems to be the case in the eponymous verse that opens the volume *To*. What does Miłosz mean by “this”? “This” is what he elsewhere calls his *daimonion*; it is the irrepressible impulse, entering him from without, from the world about him and his experiences therein, that pushes him to comment, to interpret, to create poetically:

To say, for once and for all, what is sitting inside me. / To scream out: People! I have deceived you / saying that this wasn't in me, / when THIS is there always, in the day and the night. / Although it is actually thanks to this / that I was able to describe your flammable cities, / your short loves and games crumbling away into dust, / earrings, mirrors, the straps of dresses sliding off the shoulder, / scenes in bedrooms and battlefields. (1-9)



It is that understanding he derives from world and event, which lies within him and matures to poetic comment, to the creation of a *Weltanschauung* based on a sense of hopelessness:

THIS is similar to the thoughts of a homeless man, walking through a freezing, strange city. // Similar to the moment when the surrounded Jew sees the heavy helmets of the German gendarmes drawing closer. // THIS is like when the son of the king goes out into the city and sees the real world: misery, illness, aging and death. // THIS may also be compared to the motionless face of a person at the moment he comprehends that he has been abandoned for all times. // Or to the words of a doctor speaking of a sentence that cannot be appealed. // Because THIS means coming into contact with a stone wall, / and the understanding, that that wall will not be moved by any of our entreaties. (19-24)

Are these endgame situations merely earthly affairs? If the foundation of Miłosz's poetic thought is the empathetic description of despairing, hopeless situations, is there any crack in the blackness, through which one might intimate a "second area" beyond that fatal wall? If so, the poet gives us precious little help in locating it. The latter verses of Miłosz are shot through with a metaphysical pessimism that mocks us with the seamlessness of the wall we stand before. In "Co mnie" ["As to me," 2003], a verse-project collected in *Wiersze ostatnie*, he asks us:

What concern is it of ours / that a part of Northern California will fall into the sea because of a great earthquake? // That the legality of marriage with computers will be debated? // That a cybernetic planetary empire will come into being? // That in the year 3000 the beginning of the fourth millennium of Christianity will be celebrated in Rome? (5-10)

It is hard not to see a sarcastic sneer in line ten, a winking doubt at a parousia so long delayed now, as to appear to the narrator just one more fairy tale, rather cruelly included here in the same category as science fiction à la Stanisław Lem and social engineering from perverse to inhuman in the legalization of "matrimony with computers."

As the poem continues, the reader is invited to consider it to be just such a crack in the wall as we have been looking for. None of this will matter to us, the narrator suggests, as we will now, after the "chaos of the world is silenced in our own regions [i.e. in ourselves]," find ourselves in another area, from whence nothing will tempt us back:

What concern is it of ours—if in our regions the chaos of the world is silenced, // and we enter into Another, beyond time and space. // Vainly

they tempt us with gifts of food and drink in the Forefathers' Eve celebration. // We will not speak up, for we will lack a tongue with which to communicate with the living. // And the useless flowers, placed once when we were already far away, will wilt. (11-15)

Despite his frequent toying with the void, it would be wrong to call Miłosz a nihilistic poet. He never fully comes out on the side of the absurdists' claims of a meaningless, haphazard world ending only in blackness, just as he never consistently proclaims an orthodox Christian world-view. Here, the best we can say is that he strikes out on a middle-way anabasis; while asserting the continued existence of the individual "once the chaos [or cacophony] is silenced," he at the same time presents us with an amorphous afterlife, and, what is more telling, a hyper-individualized existence that is a contradiction of the Dantean, Catholic conception of Unity—the communion of the saints, to which Miłosz appeals and assents in other of his poems. "Nothing will tempt us back," in the way that Mickiewicz displays the continuing interaction of the dead with the living in his play *Dziady* [*Forefathers' Eve*]; indeed, just like Giordano Bruno, an echo of which earlier poem brings this one to a close, we will be unable even to understand those voices calling to us.

This in itself is a strong index of despair. We are reminded of his friend Zbigniew Herbert's poem "U wrót doliny" ["At the Gates of the Valley"] in which he affirms "we are to be saved singly /i.e. not in groups, one by one/,"<sup>21</sup> What rest of heaven in this hyper-individualized state, in which communion has been rendered impossible? Consciously or unconsciously, Miłosz and Herbert give Sartre the lie—Hell is not other people, Hell is containment in oneself, exclusive of all other contact.

We have just such an insuperable wall of loneliness in Miłosz's latter-day retelling of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth (*Wierze ostatnie*):<sup>22</sup>

They set off. First him, then her following, but not immediately. / The clapping of his sandals and the small thudding of her feet tangled in cloth as if in a shroud. / The steep path upwards glowed with phosphor / in the darkness, which was like the walls of a tunnel. / He stopped and listened hard. / But then they stopped as well, and the echo died off. / When he began again, their double-beat took voice again. / Now closer, so it seemed to him, and now farther away. / And doubt began to grow beneath his faith / wrapping him round like cool bindweed. / Not knowing how to cry, he wept over the loss / of human hopes in the resurrection of the dead. / For now he was like all other mortals, / his lyre was silent and slept defenseless. / He knew that he had to believe, and didn't know how to believe. / And that uncertain apparition of his own steps, / counted to dullness, was to last long. / It was growing light. Broken cliffs appeared /

beneath the light-filled eye of the exit from the underworld. / And it happened just as he had felt it would. When he turned round his head / there was no one on the path behind him. (64-85)

There are two ways of understanding this verse, not mutually exclusive. Either it is a parable of man's inability to believe ("He knew he must believe, but didn't know how"), or a parable of the senselessness of faith ("It turned out just as he felt it would"). I would lean to this latter. Under Miłosz's pen, the story of Orpheus becomes, not a parable of the weakness of one man who did not mature to faith, but a confirmation of despair. Despite his faith (which he had to have, in order to submit to the empirical test, despite his premonitions of failure), his *experience* of tested faith teaches him that such expeditions of groundless hope are senseless. Orpheus is here tricked by the monarchs of the underworld, who also knew how this would end. Whether or not one wishes to see in them an allegory of God, whichever of the interpretations one chooses to favor, the message is rather clear: we are doomed to part ways, and never meet again.

All that remains us is fellow-feeling in unmerited suffering. As he puts it in "To jasne" ["It's Clear"], from *To*:

It's clear that I did not say what I really think, / because mortals are deserving of respect, / and it is forbidden to express, in speech or in written characters / the secrets of our common bodily misery. / To the wavering, the weak, the uncertain, this labor has been meted: / to elevate oneself two centimeters above one's head / and say to someone in despair, / "I too wept over my own self, in the same way."

Ironically enough, this little verse is one more expression of metaphysical loneliness. For this speaker's compassion for others—assuming that the last two lines are not a sarcastic slap against those wallowing in self pity—is predicated upon compassion for his own poor self, and does not suggest any material relief of the other motivated by empathy.

These verses of eternity as solitary confinement are curiously similar in tone to the loneliness poems of his California exile. The thought arises of its own accord: for Miłosz, so attached to corporal, physical being, is death itself an exile? Is heaven seen as no "happy home" at all, but eternal banishment? We again recall the hope expressed in an earlier poem, that heaven will be a continuation of this familiar world.

The difficulties, the contradictory statements, the metaphysical waffling found in the later poems of Czesław Miłosz, are easy for any

Christian (any believer, actually) to diagnose. Unsatisfied with revelation, yet intuiting God's presence, nagged by eschatological doubts, he tries to go it on his own. It is this that is at the bottom of his despair, and his sense of eternal banishment. It is a path that *can* be trod, perhaps, but only by the mystics; it is definitely not the road to be chosen by the perplexed, the anxious, the frightened seekers.

Such indeed does Miłosz's narrators present themselves as—confused seekers lacking orientation points—in the poem “Dobroć” [“Goodness”] for example, dated December 22, 2003, and collected in *Wiersze ostatnie*. These meditations on the person of St. Francis of Assisi conclude with:

And so I asked myself how it was that he was able to tame / rebellion in himself, and rise up to humble love. / Perhaps because he understood the world, although evil, yet still existing, / as something better than non-existence. / But he also believed in the immaculate beauty of the earth / from before Adam's fall. / Whose freely-willed decision brought death upon both people and animals. / But that was already something that my reason is unable to accept. (17-24)

Here, even the Genesis story that he was able to comprehend, though idiosyncratically, so many times before, has become “incomprehensible” for him, or perhaps rather “unacceptable.”

One page earlier, in the properly entitled poem “W depresji” [“In Depression”], the narrator confides to the reader:

In the depths of my despair I came to know a world without hope, // it's color was gray, like a day shut off from the sun by clouds. // And I heard: “This is just right for you.” / “You deserve nothing better.” (1-4)

This sentence impels him to a burst of syncretistic petitioning:

Then I began to cry out: // “King of brightness! Take me up! / Giver of Mercy, gird me round! / Amon, Zeus, Jehovah, accept me in your choirs! // I cannot take breath without You, / Sun of Righteousness! // I cannot run without You, / Sun of Good Counsel!” (8-14)

It is a measure of his despairing confusion—so similar in tone to Faust's final soliloquy (“Mountains and hills, Come! Come and fall on me! / And hide me from the heavy wrath of God!”) that Miłosz's narrator flails about in every conceivable theosophical direction, invoking supernature under names at turns Judeo-Christian, pagan, gnostic-hermetic and Masonic. It may be a measure of his sarcasm, this leveling of all

prayer and all deity to the farcical, for the poem ends on this strong note of independent agnosticism:

And then I thought, that I had discovered the world as it really is. // And I felt pity for people, because they comfort one another with fairy tales // from books arranged long ago, thousands of years ago. (15-17)

If he is to reject all of the ancient books (and those who trust *them* might just as equally pity *him*), only one other option remains him: as we have said before, he must go it alone. And as we have said before, this is a path that can be attempted only by the truly spiritually gifted and mature. Such, it seems, the narrator asserts himself to be at the end of this poem, at least by implication. We will see in a while just what this attitude has to offer us in this regard.

What is left to the mystagogue who rejects the sacred works of millennia passed? What, but the gnostic habit of writing scripture anew. “Przerażenie” [“Sudden Terror”], from *Druga przestrzeń*, is just such an example of quirky exegesis:

Really, they believe a little, and don't believe a little. / They go to church so people won't think them godless. / During the sermon they think of Julka's breasts, of elephants, of the price of butter, / of New Guinea. // He dared to think, while kneeling in the Garden of Gethsemane that night, / that such Christians will also be / and on his back he felt the clammy sweat of terror.

This verse, so indicative of the gnostic impulse to write a rival canon and tell us “what really happened in Gethsemane,” is one degree of distance from the poet, being as it is the tenth verse in the cycle entitled *Książd Seweryn* [*Father Seweryn*]. We will have the occasion to discuss this cycle, and try to discover what is behind the person of the Catholic priest who has lost his faith, and to what degree he can be seen as a spokesman for Miłosz's own thought. However, this particular poem does show affinities with a strain of theological thought we have come across before—Miłosz's seeming ignorance of the real significance of the heart of Catholicism—the meeting, the physical meeting, of the believer and his God in the Sacrament of the Altar.

Can we really even entertain the supposition that Christ would feel “terror” at the thought of churchgoers not paying attention during a priest's sermon? How many sermons, after all, are worth listening to? He might just as easily be horrified at the shallow level of evangelical talent in His latter-day apostles of the clerisy. No, only a poet, or a strict, Sola

Scriptura, reformed Protestant, who sets the preaching of the word before the “commemoration” at the “communion table,” which he has devalued to the level of a mere symbolic action, could put such an emphasis on the spoken word.

The much-maligned Catholic “ignorance” of Scripture, while Protestants often have chapter and verse of both Testaments at immediate recall, the oblivious telling of rosary beads during the old Latin Mass by people unable to follow along in the sacred tongue, the manner in which certain parts of the ritual were consciously said in a whisper by the priest, and even the seeming off-handed approach to Sunday obligation that says, “as long as we make it to church before the Consecration, we’ve fulfilled our duty,” are all excellent witnesses to a Catholic truth that Miłosz overlooks. Catholics are not in church to hear the sermon; they may miss the readings, psalm and Gospel altogether. They are there, not to hear old letters, but to meet a Person—God, Jesus Christ, body, blood, soul and divinity, Who becomes miraculously present when the priest, acting *in persona Christi*, pronounces the words over the elements. Why should Christ be horrified at foreseeing people drowning during Fr. Seweryn’s explication of the miracle of loaves and fishes, which they have heard a hundred times before? But if Miłosz had Him foresee with terror their indifference to His Presence, the lackadaisical, unprepared way in which they receive Him, or their inability to adore His Presence at the elevation, well, that would be understandable. Yet this is not what Miłosz wrote, and we are again at a loss to explain how a poet so fiercely devoted to the real could overlook the most sublime Reality, furnished in a real way, by a religion founded upon physical reality. How is it that, unlike Caravaggio, Miłosz never saw the great, philosophical import of Christ taking Thomas’ hand and pressing it into the wound in His side, even after Thomas’ expression of faith and acknowledgement of His Godhead? One reason, perhaps not the only one, yet an important one nonetheless, is Miłosz’s excessive reliance on intellect, ratiocination and discourse, all characteristic of gnostic elitism, which will have nothing to do with other, more ineffable, manners of communion and experience of the divine, intuitive, simple, trusting and real.

Several pages before this, he offers the verse “Przekupnie,” which can be seen as eloquent of this position:

In the place where the miracle happened the merchants set up their bazaar stalls, one after another along the road along which the pilgrims wend their way // They set out their wares, amazed at the gullibility of humans, which makes them buy little medals, little crosses, and rosaries. // They even have plastic bottles shaped like the Mother of God in which to hold the healing

water. // The sick on their stretchers, the paralytics on their chairs, // confirm the merchants in their contemptuous certainty, that religion is nothing but self-consolation, from the easily understood need of rescue. // They rub their hands together, they reckon, they stock up with new supplies of teeny crucifixes or nickel medallions with images of the Pope. (1-6)

At first, one might think this a poem critical of the cynical hawkers, especially as the Polish word *przekupnie* is a somewhat yellowed-with-age term used in Biblical translations of the scene of Christ casting out the merchants from the Temple. The poem begins with the assertion of the miracle having taken place, and there is nothing there to suggest irony; the burlesque image of the water bottles shaped like Mary and the almost blasphemous, snide coinage *krucyfiksiki* [“cute little crucifixes”] can be said to reflect upon the merchants, rather than the narrator. But notice how the poem ends:

And the pilgrims, observing their faces, in which lurks a barely concealed grin, feel threatened in their faith, as if they were children faced by adults, by the possessors of a secret unclearly guessed at. (7)

This list of information is stated just as matter-of-factly as that of the miracle; in this way, faith and doubt, legend and fact, cancel each other out. As a matter of fact, this last statement can be said to surpass the first, because of the importance accorded it by its ultimate position. The lines between merchant and pilgrim are drawn by the poet in no uncertain terms: adult vs. baby, ironically wise vs. gullibly trusting, initiated, possessed of a higher knowledge, vs. uninitiated, the vulgar herd. We would be charitable in associating this with gnosticism. It is not—the merchants are not initiated adepts of a profounder understanding, they are cynical parasites making money of misfortunate people who make use of religion as a self-comfort; in other words, as opium.

Out of fairness to Miłosz, and in testimony to the continued ambiguous depth of his later poetry,<sup>23</sup> we must point out that the message of this poem need not be as dark as we make it out to be. The pilgrims’ faith is challenged, but not necessarily overcome, by the smirks of the merchants. Consider a similar parascriptural adventure of Miłosz’s later years, the 2003 poem “Syn Arcykapłana” [“The High Priest’s Son”]. The narrator of this *audiat et altera pars* verse is the son of Annas, who participated in the judicial murder of Jesus Christ. The poem ends with a challenging plea:

Even if my father wanted to rescue / the Nazarene, that one still wounded him severely. // He wounded his piety, the very essence of which / was the conviction of the immeasurable distance / dividing the Creator from us, mortals. // And you, disciples of Jesus, can you not understand / what it is for the ears of pious people to hear your statement, / that that man was God? (18-25)

Is Miłosz's narrator again indulging in a relativizing excursion into exegesis, inserting a plea for understanding on the basis of cultural perspective, in a place where centuries of Christian tradition speak out clearly against the evil committed by the Sanhedrin, in opting to kill one innocent man in order to potentially save thousands (but *innocent* thousands?) of others? There is nothing to suggest with certainty that Miłosz shares the opinions of his narrator. Indeed, the very fact of using a narrative persona sets him at one remove, at least, from the statements made. Is it not equally conceivable that, just as in the resurrection challenge from *Kroniki* discussed above, Miłosz is setting a shocking challenge before his tepid Christian readers? Are you aware, in other words, what your profession of faith in this Person entails?

This is certainly to be considered. But even where Miłosz would speak as a Christian, coming out on the side of order and God, the dualistic overlay of his thought is so all-suffusing that he cannot seem to state even generally accepted Christian truths in a non-gnostic manner. In "Antegor," from the same last volume, we have this adventure in soteriology:

Our Father, who is in Heaven // cannot be the father of death. / Yet the whole world, for millions of years, is in the power of death, and the lord of death is the devil, // who is called for that reason the Prince of This World. // Of all religions, only Christianity has declared war on death. // God subjected Himself to the diabolical law of necessity, // took on flesh, died, was buried, and rose again. // In this way abolishing universal law. (3-10)

Unable (or unwilling, cf. "Teodycea") to assent to the common orthodox Christian dogma of the non-existence of evil, which was introduced into the world by the freely-chosen rebellion of beings originally created good by an all-good God, this persona must opt instead for the simplistic, really rather childish, myth of antagonizing titans: God on one hand, and Lucifer on the other, the ultimate victory of the former not only foreknown, but the planned result of a *provoked* rebellion.

Another good example of this intellectualizing tendency is the poem "Ogrodnik" ["Gardener"] from *To*. Here, Miłosz returns to the Adam and Eve story, and reinvents it in a way that should be familiar to us by now.



The narrator, the “greybearded gardener,” is God Himself, brooding over the fall soon to take place:

Invisible in the foliage, He brooded, saddened, / seeing fires and bridges,  
ships ad houses, // the airplane flying like a spark through the nighttime  
sky, / beds with baldachims and battlefields.<sup>24</sup> (13-16)

Here, however, unlike in earlier such poems, Miłosz’s speaker steps away from the thesis that man was not fully man before sinning, that sin was a necessary evil. This was *not* to be, he asserts:

Adam and Eve were not created for that, / to do obeisance to the prince and  
ruler of this world. // Another, sunny, world endured beyond time. / Given  
over to them both for eternal happiness.] (1-4)

Addressing our first parents in silent soliloquy, God laments:

O my poor children, so you are in such a hurry / to the sand dunes, in  
which the skull bares its yellow teeth? // To enclosing hips in panties,  
crinolines, / to the discovery of contingency, result and cause? // Lo, there  
approaches my enemy, who will soon tell you: / Give it a try, and you will  
become like unto gods. // The lackeys of selfish love and crime, / and truly  
gods, only deformed ones. (17-24)

Still, nothing can prevent the fall. It is coming to fruition, just as the apple of discord is ripening to be plucked:

For days and ages He looked on, as if through a telescope / at the entirety  
of His work, so well begun, // which through the sin of coming to know  
was to be turned into / the insatiability of the soul and the woundable body.  
// He warned them, but He knew that it was nothing worth, / because they  
were already ready, and, so to speak, already en route. (7-12)

The fact that Miłosz has his narrator express this ripening, which happened in eternity, by “days and centuries,” arrests our eye, but not for long. After all, he is doing nothing different from the writer of Genesis, who expresses the creation, again a supra-historical event, in terms of seven days; he approaches us, creatures in and of temporality, in terms familiar to us. The same thing can be said of the term *zasmucony* in line 13—a trait rather odd in application to the impassible God. But again, do we not read of God’s anger in Genesis? And at any rate, this also draws the Incomprehensible further into our human ken, and is quite in accord with the final human appeal of the concluding lines 25-32. The more

problematical thing about this “what really happened” narrative is the idea of process itself. In the Biblical account, as in orthodox theology (and Milton too), the fall of man is a catastrophe of cosmic proportions, a destructive rupture in the fabric of creation, after which it is debased forever, at least in the sense of the effective destruction of the earthly paradise; the death of Christ renders our death potentially without sting, but does not do away with death *eo ipso*, nor does it eliminate the risk of damnation, which hangs above us all on a much thinner thread than that which suspended its blade above the first humans. We see process here twice, in lines 11-12, describing the uprush to the fall: “He warned them, but He knew, that it was nothing worth, / Because they were already ready and, so to speak, already en route”, and in lines 25-32, describing the restitution of harmony:

My unfortunate children, how long the road, / until the ruined garden  
blossoms anew, // and along the alley bordered with lime trees you return to  
the porch, / where sage and thyme lend their fragrance to the flowerbeds. //  
And was it necessary to dive into the abyss, / think up systems, rather than  
live in a fairy tale, / above which broods my constant care? / for the  
Scripture speaks the truth, I have the face of a man.

The onus is somewhat off Adam and Eve in this poem, who do not rush to the “progress” of sin/civilization as in earlier verses, but are duped into making their bad choice by the “enemy.” It is true that the three penultimate lines of the poem do suggest that a continued state of innocence would be tantamount to an eternal infancy for mankind and that man always chafes under the eternal preceptorship of any agency—even that of the Lord. And thus in line 12, there is the sense of a planned fall, a natural ripening to the inevitable, which has all the bittersweet atmosphere of children leaving the hearth for college, or marriage, but which has little to do with the tragedy of the fall, the sin and the guilt, which is at the heart of Judeo-Christian post-lapsarian theology. God cannot prevent the fall, nor, it seems, should He, any more than a parent should keep his or her adult offspring locked in their bedroom and safe from the world outside. All well and good—had God indeed prevented the fall, he would have deprived Adam and Eve of their humanity, making them into robots. However, there is a gulf between the truly Christian interpretation of the event (even the theology of the *felix culpa* does not disregard the tragedy), and the benign, evolutionary scheme proposed by Miłosz. For similarly, the return to God’s friendship as described in the concluding lines of the poem, is nothing more than another process, a “long road” to be traversed before man and woman return once more to the fullness of God’s love.

There is nothing here at all, no hint, of God's action in giving His Son to die the brutal death of the Cross, His active and drastic intervention in history, which was to effect the reconciliation. Instead of a Christ-centered salvation history, Miłosz presents the epic of mankind as a monomyth à la Joseph Campbell: separation, initiation, return, the hero of which is feeble man himself.

The picture of God that we derive from such a poem is that of a negative, clockmaker Deity. In Deism, that rationalizing effort at enlightened, "natural" religion, God creates the universe as a giant machine, sets it running according to the laws He has devised for it, and then steps back and lets it hum along, which it does without further activity on His part. Miłosz's God has created a machine, too, in creating man and the universe, but, like the mad scientist familiar from horror movies, He is brilliant enough to create the monster, yet impotent to control it once he has brought it to life. He steps back, watches the show get out of hand, and can do nothing but wring His own hands until it runs its (finally successful) course.

Again, orthodox Christian theology does present us with a *somewhat* similar image of God, who foresees the consequences of man's (and Lucifer's) freely-willed decisions to work ill. But foresight is not foreordination, and it is not that God *cannot* intervene, but rather that He *will* not, out of respect for the free will of His creatures, which is exactly that which makes them human and not machines. Thus God, in the orthodox conception of His nature, is majestic, unconquerable, impassible and secure, always in control. With Miłosz, it is different: the poverty of God, His impuissance, is a constant characteristic of His nature in the later poetry, perhaps because of the poet's uncomfortable obsession with the "presence" of evil in the world, that pushes him, even in verses like these, to a dualistic color of thought.

Process and foreknowledge aside, we can make the distinction clear in the manner in which God's paternal love is shown in the Catholic tradition, as opposed to what we find in Miłosz's later work. God, in the Catholic tradition, is not aloof; His love is displayed in the greatest imaginable sacrifice, paid out to reconcile man to Himself: the sacrifice of the Cross. This glorious mystery is missing from Miłosz's work, in which the love of God is shown, as here, in his empathetic weakness. It is this which most sets Miłosz apart from the great Catholic poets, stretching from St. Romanos through Donne and George Herbert and Hopkins to Eliot, Garneau, Zahradníček.

The dualistic conception of God found in Miłosz's latter works can be seen in the otherwise moving verse "Modlitwa" ["Prayer"] from *To*, in which,

Nearly ninety, and still with the hope, / that I will say, declare, cough it out of me. // If not in front of people, then in front of You, / who have nourished me with honey and wormwood. // I am ashamed, because I must believe, that You have led and protected me, / as if I had exceptionally deserved this from You. // I was similar to those from the camps, who twined little twigs of pine together / like a cross, and mumbled to it on their barracks cot. (1-8)

Here, along with the Christian interpretation of the fallen world as an inimical wilderness, through which the faithful are guided, against which they are defended, by a loving God, is the assertion that—unlike the Father of Jesus, who would not hand a snake to his child asking for a fish—both sweetness and bitterness arise from the same source: Him.

Yet blessed the son corrected by his father, and thus it was with him:

I lifted heavenward the prayer of an egotist, and You deigned to fulfill it, / so that I should come to see how senseless it was. // But when I prayed for a miracle, out of pity for others, / as always, both heaven and earth were silent. (9-12)

But if he claims to understand the pedagogy behind God's goodness to him, even in "egotistical" matters, the silence of the heavens in regard to those others, for whom he begs mercy, is inscrutable. It can only be explained, he suggests, by the heterodox idea of predestination, which even in the theology of Calvin is a-moral, or at least beyond morality:

The least normal pupil in Fr. Chomski's class, / already back then I was fascinated by the spinning funnel of predestination. // And now You slowly close my five senses, / and I am an old man lying in the darkness. // Given over to that which so tortured me, / that I ran straight ahead, in composing verses. // Free me from guilt, real and imagined. / Grant me the certainty that I labored for Your glory. // In the hour of my agony be with me with Your suffering, / which cannot rescue the world from pain. (17-26)

The schoolmen were fond of Zen-like quandaries, such as: We all admit that God is omnipotent. Can He, therefore, create a stone so heavy that even He could not lift it? There is no logical answer to the question, which would supersede the illogicality of even the impossible being possible for Him to Whom all things must be possible. But for the

scholastic theologians, this is an exercise in rhetoric—what many call today “critical thinking”—mental gymnastics, *not* theology. Miłosz, however, approaches theology from his over-reasoning standpoint, and ends up at the position that God is bound by the same laws He has ratified. Not that He respects these laws, suspending them only rarely (which moments are called miracles), but that He is just as fettered to them as we are.

We have said from time to time that it is unfair to read Miłosz’s poetry as a philosophical tract. It would be just as unfair to look for a consistent theology in his poetry, had he not himself set out, in later years, to write a “theological tract,” but here, looking at the poetry as poetry, we point out that this theologically-loaded image of the “impotent God” occurs often in these latter verses, as it does here, as a stab at shocking rhetorical effect.

When he moves on to a less pious, and more polemical, verse such as “Alkoholik wstępuje w bramę niebios” [“An Alcoholic Enters the Gates of Heaven”], from the same volume, we find it more difficult to cover the heterodox assertions of predetermination with artistic argument, as Giotto’s bishop the nakedness of St. Francis, with his cloak.

Calvinism struck firm root among the independent-minded nobles of renaissance Lithuania, and more than one of them, we assume, would agree with the theological tilt of this poem. God, the eternal puppet-master, is set up as a whipping-boy for the poor decisions of His creatures:

Knowing nothing of the fact that You of the Book of Genes / chose me for  
a new experiment, / as if You had not enough proofs of the fact already /  
that so-called free will avails nothing against predestination. (10-14)

The poem develops into—yet another—meditation on the sense of evil in a world ostensibly governed by a good God:

How can You look on / simultaneous, milionfold pain? // I think that  
people, if they cannot believe in Your existence, because of this, / are  
deserving of praise in Your eyes. // But maybe because You had  
immeasurable mercy, came down to earth, / to experience what mortal  
beings feel. // Bearing the pain of crucifixion for sin, but whose? (28-34)

No answer is given. Since Miłosz’s alcoholic will not accept the answers developed by centuries of orthodoxy,<sup>25</sup> he is doomed to pose the same, circular questions, which again lead him, not to doubt in the sacrificial mercy of God, but in the *sense* of the Sacrifice. For whose sin is being redeemed, if sin is something unavoidable, a jerk on the strings

that animate us? Whose sin, if free will avails nothing against predestination?

The poem ends with a paraphrase of Calvin's theology of predestined damnation as emphasis of the majesty of God:

And so I pray to You, because I don't know how not to pray. // For my heart desires You, although I know that You will not heal me. // And that it must be like this, that those who suffer, continue to suffer, praising Your Name. (35-37)

It is to be noted that, despite his "unmerited" suffering, the alcoholic is awarded, in the end, heaven.<sup>26</sup> This is, it seems, the lot of most, if not all, human beings, according to Miłosz. In "Późna dojrzałość" ["Late Maturity"], from *Druga przestrzeń*, the unifying human denominator of suffering is expressed in unison with his old chestnut of *apokatastasis*:

I was not separated from people. We were united in sorrow and pity / and I said: We have forgotten, that we are all children of the King. // For we all come from there, where there is yet no distinction / between Yes and No, nor distinction into Is, Will Be, and Was. // We are misfortunate, for we make use of less than a hundredth part of the gift / which we were given for our long journey. /.../ I always knew that I would be a worker in the vineyard, just the same / as all people living simultaneously with me, conscious or / unconscious of that fact. (7-12; 16-17)

Despite Miłosz's avowed fascination with St. Augustine, how far is he, when his writings are considered, from the Bishop of Hippo, who proved in his exegesis of Matthew (with an attention to the Word that ought to impress a poet), that the eternity of felicity in heaven is predicated on the eternity of suffering in Hell? That where Christ promises the first, he warns us of the second, in equal terms? The name Origen does not occur, as far as I can see, in the poetry of Czesław Miłosz. Yet *he* is Miłosz's patristic "daimonion," not Augustine. For it was the poor, misguided, though brilliant Origen who first in the Christian world flirted with the unscriptural idea of "eternal renewal of all beings," good and evil, effectively redeeming the Devil and all of the unrepentant, angry souls at the end of time, along with the martyrs and confessors, the virgins and patriarchs and patient, good and humble little people of God.<sup>27</sup>

Every Catholic prays, at the end of each decade of the rosary, for Christ to forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell, and lead all souls to heaven, especially those most in need of His mercy. But this petition still contains an acknowledgement of the reality of eternal punishment, and this is what distinguishes the Catholic sentiment from

that expressed here by Miłosz, according to which salvation is achieved, not by merit cooperating with grace,<sup>28</sup> but through the mere fact of one's having been called into existence. Everyone, in short, has a role to play. Blake, in the nineteenth century, still might be able to get away with this sort of heterodoxy, but Miłosz? After what he's witnessed with his own eyes? What is there in that last, inclusive line to exclude Hitler and Stalin from the number of those "laboring the vineyard" alongside Miłosz? Again we see that, with the disappearance of the tyrants against whom he fought until 1989, Miłosz is changed; here he seems to have lain down his arms, chief among which was his strong moral sense of right and wrong, and responsibility for one's actions.

Most Catholics have perhaps experienced a similar moment of *storge* during the Mass as that expressed in "W Krakowie" ["In Kraków," *Druga przestrzeń*]. Gazing at his fellow worshippers, Miłosz's narrator says:

And does not each<sup>29</sup> of them have to snuggle into the Eternally Living, /  
into His fragrance of apples, saffron, cinnamon, carnations and incense, /  
into Him, who is and who will come / with the brightness of wax candles  
flaming? (10-13)

Playing along, for the sake of argument, that "everyone must" so burrow into the embrace of God,<sup>30</sup> we still wonder, would those same Catholics agree with the over-gentle image of Christ presented in "Werki," from the same volume, if the Guide there mentioned is He?

The priests have taught about salvation and damnation. / I know nothing of  
that, now. / I have felt on my shoulder the hand of my Guide, / but He said  
nothing about any punishment, nor did He promise any reward. (14-17)

As Ira Sadoff puts it:

If we have any doubt about the secularization of the spirit here (or at least  
its deinstitutionalization), the last stanza refuses the church's notion of  
salvation and damnation: whether it's the muse or the forces of conscience,  
of the unconscious or a God, the guide is left ambiguous.<sup>31</sup>

This sort of non-judgmental Guide, so far removed from the Judge, as Christ describes Himself in the canonical passages foretelling the Day of Judgment in Matthew 25, for example (and thus, one more example of the gnostic "how it really was" theme), might be fine and dandy for those who get the "good news" from Miłosz, in the poetic church he finds in

“Żywotnik” [“Biography,” *Wiersze ostatnie*], where he so describes his poetic career:

9. And so went on the construction of the immense cathedral / built of sighs, cries, hymns and laments, / a house for all: faithful and unfaithful, / for the taming of primitive fears

but it is a far cry from both the Carthage of Augustine, and the Rome of John Paul II, which has always taught that eternal felicity is balanced by eternal reprobation, like it or not, and that one arrives at one or the other of these two destinations according to of the moral value of his or her human actions, freely-willed, *not* preprogrammed by God.<sup>32</sup>

No, Miłosz's cult of origins, of roots, is so pronounced, that a longing assertion of a pagan, ancient Lithuanian pantheism is stubbornly at the foundations of much of his mystical musings,<sup>33</sup> no less than are Blake, Swedenborg, and the dualists. In “Obecność” [“Presence,” 2002, from *Wiersze ostatnie*], he writes of entering a numenal space on the banks of the Nieważa, as a barefoot child:

A Presence swelled up, but I know not whose. // The air was full of it, it touched me, / embraced me. // It spoke to me with the fragrances of grass, / the fluting voice / of the oriole, the chirping of sparrows. // If I had been taught the names of the gods, / I would have recognized their faces with ease. // But I grew up in a Catholic family, so soon / it was demons and saints swirling about me. / And yet I felt the Presence of them all, gods / and demons, / as if they were floating about within one immense / incomprehensible Being (4-10)

And again everything is in its place, everything, with “good” and “evil,” necessary and presenting each other with a helping hand as they wheel about in that “Being.” Note the way in which Miłosz assents to the presence of supernature, but does a back-flip from the tradition of the Christian missionaries who converted his realm, the last of all Europe, in the fourteenth century. They did not disabuse the pagan Lithuanians of their belief in the spiritual forces around them, but explained their existence as demonic (the inimical *numina*) and angelic/holy (the guardians and helpers). Here Miłosz traces the path backwards: acknowledging the spiritual element of life, he proclaims the division of these spiritual beings into good saints and evil demons as the result of a Catholic world-view (again, cultural relativity) and elevates them all to divinity. Now, since the “good” and “bad” are necessary complements (as every good dualist, every good gnostic will assert), there can be nothing really bad, and



likewise, no ultimate good. To Carthage then I came, and got out of town as quickly as possible, burning, burning burning...

And although his logical, hyper-rational dualism gets the upper hand in poems like “Nad strumieniem” [“On the Banks of the Stream,” *To*]:

It seems to me that I hear the voice of the Demiurge: / “Either deaf cliffs as  
on the day of creation, / or life, on the condition of death, / and that beauty  
that so inebriates you” (17-20)

according to which a world of suffering *has* to be made by some demiurge, and not an all-powerful, compassionate God, and death and suffering introduced into it as the unavoidable price of earthly beauty, the kind of karmic philosophy contained in “Obecność” leads Miłosz further afield, to the suggestion that evil is a construct of the human mind. In “Unde malum” (*To*), he writes, if only man took himself out of the picture,

On the lots of ruined factories / oaken forests will grow / the blood of the  
deer torn apart by the wolves / will not be seen by anyone / the hawk will  
swoop down on the rabbit / unwitnessed // evil will disappear from the  
world / along with consciousness // for really, Tadeusz / both good and evil  
come from man (12-21)

This poem, written in response to lines from Tadeusz Różewicz quoted as a motto:

Whence comes evil? / What do you mean, whence? // from man/ always  
from man, / and only from man

There is a great difference between the two poets here. Ironically, the secular humanist Różewicz is closer to traditional Christianity in pointing to man as the root of evil, whereas the ostensibly Christian Miłosz insinuates that all moral perspectives, both good and evil, are arbitrary constructs of the human mind.

Able to be read as a sarcastic riposte here, to these really quite healthy statements of the other poet,<sup>34</sup> we find an elaboration of his sentiments in a literal sense in the poem “Kto?” [“Who?”] from *Na brzegu rzeki*. Here, the poet apostrophizes reality thus:

Be yourselves, things of this earth, be yourselves. / Do not depend on us,  
on our breath, / on the fantasies of the treacherous and greedy eye. / We  
long for you, for your essence, / that you should endure as you are, / pure  
and unobserved by anyone. (12-17)

Ironically, it is the seeing eye of man, which infuses these things with value, which taints them by abstracting them from their essential *haecceitas* to a debased state of instrumentality. It gets even more serious in another verse from this collection, “Do Pani Profesor w obronie honoru kota i nie tylko” [“To Madame Professor, in Defense of a Cat, and Not Only”]. The directing (and subjective, hence relative) role of the human perspective not only causes the spectacle of one dumb animal killing another to be considered “cruel,” “evil,”

For let us note, that only consciousness / is able to incarnate itself for a moment in the Other, / com-passionating the pain and panic of the mouse // ... // Nature devouring, Nature devoured, / a steaming slaughterhouse open night and day, / and who created it? was it the good dear God? // Yes, certainly, they are innocent: / spiders, praying mantises, sharks, pythons. / And only we say: cruelty. (7-9; 16-21)

it also has subjectively created the person of a compassionate God, created in *our* image and likeness:

Our consciousness and our conscience, / lonely in the pale anthills of the galaxies / place their hope in a human God. // Who cannot not feel and cannot not think<sup>35</sup> / Who is related to us in warmth and movement, / for, as He declared, we are similar to Him. (22-27)

And thus, the narrator suggests, is the objective existence of God “hacked down” to a pleasant fable, a bit of wishful thinking, but, logically, a) if this is so, God is “impuissant” again, bound by the same cutting cords of suffering that dig into our own flesh, or b) (or “and b”), it makes us think in categories that are more than uncomfortable, that make life so very difficult to bear, such as the objective “good” and “evil” proposed by that grimacing moralist, St. Augustine.<sup>36</sup> No, the Christian nature, nature as defined and described by Christianity, is something that sentient consciousness rebels against. See, for example, the curious verse “Przeciwieństwo” [“Contrariness,”] from *To*:

On the one side the world, on the other, people and gods. // The world is unbending, inexorable, indifferent. [...]. // People and gods are in a constant cycle of guilt and forgiveness. // [...] They are weak, changeable, awaiting help from each other. // The loves of people and gods are constantly threatened by the possibility of their loss. // Their clothes, masks and buskers are proof of the fact that they do not wish to remain / in the order of Nature. // At the same time mortal and immortal, they live in their very own region / high above the earth. // Do not forget, you who are

either people or gods, / the homage owed you from the suns and galaxies  
of the world. (1-2; 4; 5-9)

A positive verse, a verse “pumping up” humanity. Certainly. But then again, so is a poem like “Późna dojrzałość.” And we wonder, considering this little foray into pagan polytheism (just who are those “gods” if we are to take the speaker literally?), how is this poem any different, any less modish (and thus silly) than Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, the Dionysian envoy of which the poet earlier displayed as a mere product of the Nietzschean/Swinburnean “yellow book” crowd?

Although, as we have seen, in these latter verses of Czesław Miłosz the poet’s idiosyncratic hermeticism, which in its sunnier aspects leans toward the *apokatastasis* of Origen, what we have earlier called his teeth-gritting, despairing faith does not completely vanish. Often, this is linked to a growing acceptance of his eventual passing, which, he felt, couldn’t have been very far off. For example, in the self-reflective “Sztukmistrz” [“Artisan,” *To*], he apostrophizes:

Artisan, you are constructing a star, which is to wander / over heavens  
belonging to those just recently born. // All the while you are sliding away  
without sorrow, thinking about how difficult / it was to live through life. //  
And learn, that we receive not what we desired, / and that the two greatest  
virtues are resignation and stubbornness. (4-6)

Further on, he adds this reflection: “May they, who are to continue the work, begin there / where you ended, master of despair overcome.”<sup>8</sup> Yet that stubborn devotion to “resistance” referred to in the paradoxical last line above is perhaps at the bottom of his difficulties; he can never truly “resign” himself to anything, any authority, fully. His despair is never fully conquered, and one gets the sense that this is how he likes it.

This atmosphere of qualified peace pervades the poem “Przykład” (“Example”) from *To*, in which the “example” (one thinks automatically of the *Imitation of Christ*) is that of a person who refuses to be obsessed with questions such as the quandary of evil in the world, questions no man can really ever answer on his own:

My eighty year old woman friend writes in her memoirs: / “I have never  
had time nor care for worries.” / Her good example strengthens me. // The  
Wilia river shines, the moon is at full, behind the bus station / we make  
love. And that moment will cheer me at times, / although there is a lot of  
bitterness in my biography. (1-6)

Toward the end of his life, Miłosz often has his narrators embrace the past; here, as good memories, which make life bearable in difficult times. It sounds a bit flat, but for those who have kept trudging pace with Miłosz all along his *via dolorosa*, this personal respite comes as a veritable liberation. As are the final three lines of the poem, in which the poet seems to have followed his friend's example and relaxed—leaving all his torturous worries in the hands of God:

To sing and dance before the countenance of the Lord! / Quite simply  
because complaints will get you nowhere, / as my brave, unvanquished  
Irena is wont to say. (7-9)

We will consider this tendency, this determination to stop thinking already and live, a little later on. It occurs with some frequency in the poems of his last years, but he can never really overcome his intellectual makeup, his drive to understand even the incomprehensible.<sup>37</sup>

Now, if he is the “master of despair overcome” (a phrase which can equally indicate his ability to manage the despair he has broken, like a bronco, as well as a final victory over it), how did this come about? At times it seems not so much a spiritual victory as a metaphysical, a philosophical triumph. In “Wybierając wiersze Jarosława Iwaszkiewicza na wieczór jego poezji” [“Selecting Poems of Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, for an Evening Devoted to his Poetry,” *To*], he states:

Escape into nothingness? Even if it were true / that nothing will remain of  
the dreams / of our kind save the huge laughter of the vacuum, / and that  
we are individual nothingnesses / like lumps of slime on an endless beach,  
/ even so the brave are deserving of homage, / for expressing their protest  
to the very end, / against a faith in annihilating death. (14-21)

This is an agnostic protest against the idea of nihilism, based on a love for and conviction in the dignity of the human person, a sort of *fides humaniorum*, which is expressed elsewhere, for example in the short verse “Jeżeli nie ma” [“If there is no”] from *Druza przestrzeń*:

If God does not exist, / even so everything is not allowed to man. / He is  
his brother's guardian / and is not allowed to sadden his brother, / telling  
him, that God does not exist.

This is classical humanism. It shifts, hypothetically, the ground of conscious moral existence from the divine to the human, but it will not allow the human to treat of moral imperatives as arbitrary. Even if God did not exist, right moral choices are still demanded of lonely, abandoned

humanity. This, at times, does shade into a gnostic elitism. In “Nie wyjawiać...” [“Do not Reveal...”] a 2002 poem, or sketch, collected in *Wiersze ostatnie*, we read:

Do not reveal what is forbidden. Preserve the secret. / Because what is revealed is harmful to people. / Just like the room which, in childhood, terrified one. [...]. / And what should I find in that room? / Something different then, something different now, / when I am an old man who has described for so long / what the eyes can see. / Until I finally learned, that it is most advisable and commendable / to keep quiet. (1-3; 5-10)

This poem seems to owe something to Horace’s “*Odi profanum volgus et arceo*,” which would be a somewhat ironic kinship, in that Horace seeks to keep a mystical secret free of vulgar prying and profanation, whereas Miłosz’s speaker suggests a desire to keep a despairing truth—there are no mysteries—away from the tender-hearted, who would be damaged by the knowledge.

Yet the irony is only illusory. In “Zdziechowski,” a memorial in verse to the agnostic professor of the Jagiellonian University Marian Zdziechowski, Miłosz’s narrator insists, as he does in the earlier cited poems on this theme, that even if God were a construct of the human mind and not an independent, personal Reality, it would be wrong to dispense with such an illusion, which is necessary, in that it is a naturally occurring one in the mind of man, who needs it in order to function properly. In the very middle of the long poem, Miłosz inserts a citation from Zdziechowski’s *Pesymizm, romantyzm a podstawy chrześcijaństwa* [*Pessimism, Romanticism, and the Foundations of Christianity*, 1915]:

“There is no God—cries both nature and history, in one loud voice... yet that voice is lost in the harmony of psalms and hymns, in that grand, eternal confession, arising from the deepest depths of the soul, that like ‘a land without water’ is the soul of man without God. God exists. It is just that the fact of God’s existence is something that passes beyond the curve of thought occupied with the outside world. It is a miracle. *Le monde est irrationnel. Dieu est un miracle.*” (35-41)

He continues with this commentary :

Only the sound of bells, / only the shining of the monstrance, / mortal voices proclaiming praise / in the Dominican and Franciscan churches, / the flagstone floors worn smooth and deep by the feet of generations / protect us. Even if it is delusion / that links us in faith in the endurance of

immortality, / we give thanks, dust, for the miracle of the faithfulness of dust. (42-49)

We are reminded here of the previously-cited conclusion of "Alkoholik...;" even more to the point would be the concluding lines of "Wbrew naturze" ["Against nature," *Druga przestrzeń*], in which the gentle paradox of Zdziechowski's comments is repeated with characteristic bitterness, such as more fully reflects the tone of his "despairing faith." Telling the story of Jaś and Małgosia (sometimes the Polish equivalent of Hansel and Gretel, here used to lend a fairy-tale flavor to the parable), he concludes:

Then came marriage and love, which in essence / was but two lonelinesses, causing both of them torture, / until at last it ended in divorce. // It could have been like that, or not. // In any case, skeptical philosophy fits me like a glove. // It endows man with no elevated virtues, / nor does it endow the God created by humanity with them either. // Then, I could live in accord with my nature. // But still I repeat "I believe in God," knowing, / that there is no justification for so doing. (25-34)

These two poems, "Wbrew naturze" and "Zdziechowski," taken together, form a convincing theological argument for the existence of God, similar to that proposed by the poet earlier in "O aniołach:" since all of nature cries out that God does not exist, and yet still we are impelled to believe in Him, since even intimate human relations, which, according to the Neoplatonists, ought to lead us from human love to our approximate understanding of Divine Love, often go awry, their unhappy ends seeming to contradict the Dantean divine order of Caritas, yet still we believe, we do go "against Nature," and thus are not strictly *of* Nature, but *above* it. And if above it, then, by what right? What right but our election, or creation, by Someone standing still further beyond Nature, even more "against" postlapsarian, debased nature, and that Someone its Author, God?

This leads Miłosz to one of his most personal, and in part moving, addresses to God, the poem "Wysłuchaj" ["Hear"], from *Druga przestrzeń*. He confesses himself a poor sinner, who possesses nothing now but prayer, and pleads:

Protect me from the day of aridness and impotence. // When neither the flight of the swallow, nor the peonies, daffodils and irises in the flower / market will be for me signs of Thy glory. // When I shall be surrounded by mockers, while against their arguments / I will be unable to recall any of Thy miracles. // When I seem to myself to be a fraud and an impostor,

because I participate / in religious rites. // When I charge Thee with the institution of the universal law of death. // When I will now be ready to bow before the vacuum and call / life on earth a diabolical vaudeville. (3-12)

Here he confesses his hyper-intellectualism, which, coupled with his necessarily finite reason, is bound to lead him, by logical steps, to despair and destruction when he attempts to dissect matters so far beyond his ken. It is at these Q.E.D. moments when he needs God most.

For it is not so much nature herself which would lead us away from God, it is our scientific hubris, our materialistic, logical, hyper-rational approach to the world that mistakenly seeks to crowd Him out. In reducing everything, including humanity, to chemical soup and physical laws, not only is the beauty of nature cheapened, but man himself loses the dignity of his humanity, loses his individuality, not in favor of the collective, this time, but by being reduced to his purely material component parts. Thus Miłosz complains in “Uczeni” [“Learned Men”] from the same volume:

What sort of language, for God’s sake, do those people / in white lab coats speak? Charles Darwin / at least, felt pangs of conscience / for expressing his, as he put it, diabolical theory. / But they? After all, it was their idea: / to segregate rats in different cages, / to segregate people, writing off some of their species / as genetic losses and poisoning them. / “The pride of the peacock is the glory of God,”—wrote William Blake. / At one time, our eyes were pleased / with disinterested beauty, for its very overabundance. / But what have they left us? Only the tally sheets / of a capitalistic industry. (6-18)

Earlier on, we wondered why such an intelligent man as Czesław Miłosz would be drawn to the sloppy fairy tales of the gnostic writers. One of the answers we proposed was rooted in his rejection of totalitarianism. In gnostic authors, such as the writer of the “Hymn of the Pearl,” he saw a reflection of himself—a champion of individuality and imagination against all doctrinaire systems. Perhaps this is at the root of his love of those two heterodox masters of his, William Blake and Emmanuel Swedenborg, as well. For they not only ignore cold, dehumanizing science; by their wild assertions they strive to defend humanity by defending his spiritual makeup. As he puts it in “Do Natury” [“To Nature,” *Wiersze ostatnie*]:

It’s only him, man, who comprehends, sympathizes, // subject and not subject to the granite-like law. // The consciousness of man is in despite of

you, Nature. // From that moment I was to meditate on this my whole life long. // And who, in the countries of anthropocentric religion / will cry out against my anthropocentrism? // Or in those of an equally anthropocentric lack of faith? // William Blake was correct in uniting humanity and divinity in one.<sup>38</sup> // All your prayers to cats, wood and the Pleiades / are for naught. // Or to the wildernesses of the very beginning, as in my own ecologic / dreams. (7-16)

Still it cannot be doubted that a strong undercurrent of stubborn, satisfied doubting runs through the last volumes of Miłosz's poetry. The other side of the coin, the one face of which is Desperate Faith, might be called Proud Infidelity. Time and again in the earlier cited poem on John Paul II's eightieth birthday, the narrator underscores his conviction that it is the doubters who are the honest ones, the paradoxical bearers of hope, while the "faithful" lock themselves up in the fortress-like churches, unwilling to confront the rough-and-ready world that challenges them (like the merchants, grinning at the pilgrims in "Przekupnie"). Przychodzimy do ciebie, ludzie słabej wiary ["We come to you, people of weak faith"] the ode begins, and although in a Dantean moment the poet lauds the Pope for demonstrating, or at least for affirming, that the universe is orderly and not chaotic:

No foreigners could guess whence the hidden strength / in this priest from Wadowice. Prayer, the prophecy of poets unrecognized by progress and coin, / although they were the equals of kings, waited upon Thee, / for Thou to declare to them *urbi et orbi*, / that history is not chaos, but a broad order (9-14)

it is, again, a situation of a special *man* appearing on the scene, when divinity has passed beyond our grasp, evaporated, as it were: "Thou shepherd given us, while the gods are departing!" 15, Miłosz's narrator cries, as if affirming the triumphant secularization of the contemporary world, among the laments of humanity, "it's not enough to want to believe, in order to be able to believe," 20. Chcieć to móc ["To want to is to be able to"] is an old Polish proverb, with which Miłosz does not agree here—although the evangelical father of the possessed boy<sup>39</sup> would certainly find them credible. How then, do we move from desire to fact? From the desire of faith to the grace of faith bestowed? Not, it seems, by taking the unavoidable Kirkegaardian leap, the fear of which also held Thomas Hardy back from the splendid highway of Cardinal Newman's *Grammar of Assent*. How then? Incredibly, by continuing in doubt, by searching for proof, as if faith were a problem in mathematics or biology. That is the only possible explanation of the paradoxical lines 30-32:



When the forces of chaos take voice, / and the possessors of the truth shut themselves up in their churches, / and only the doubting remain faithful.

It is not our wish to delve into the perhaps unintended psychological quirks of the Ode, but they are there, and it would indeed be an interesting topic for analysis, why this poem written in praise of Christ's Vicar on earth should be so exclusively interested in mortality; why this poem dedicated to the Supreme Head of one of the world's largest communities of faith should be so eloquent in praise of doubt!

As we have seen, Miłosz is not only aware of the contradictions inherent in his poetic corpus, he embraces them. While this makes it difficult for the researcher attempting to map out a general curve of his poetic thought, it allows Miłosz the comfortable asterisk of "inner orthodoxy." Czesław Miłosz the poet is not necessarily Czesław Miłosz the man, and what he says *here* may have little or no relation to what he says *there*; what he writes is not necessarily what he thinks.

In "Ze szkoda" ["With Harm"], a poem from *To*, in which he accepts comparison to the national poet of Poland, the romantic Adam Mickiewicz (also a Lithuanian Pole), he goes so far as to suggest that he has not "written," as it were, but rather that something "used him" as an instrument to appear in print. The poet, at least Czesław Miłosz, we are given to understand, is not the master of his language, his language masters him:

Are we born for the purposes of mythology? / Really, without a life to call our own? / What demonism in the nature of language, / that one may only become its servant!

But, after all, it seems to have been a symbiotic relationship. The servant of words, like the clever servant in the gospel,<sup>40</sup> Miłosz was able to outwit his "master" from time to time, in the interest of wearing the camouflage outfit of contradiction that effectively keeps his inner orthodoxy from the eyes of the reader of his poetry:

And I caused harm too,<sup>41</sup> perhaps less than others. / In disguises, masks, incognito, / ambiguous. That itself is a good defense / against being recited at the annual feast. (18-21)

In the poem "Wy, pokonani" ["You, the Vanquished"], from the same volume, the aged poet (or his narrator) "apologizes" to the friends and acquaintances of his youth, for his rejection of their traditional culture that revolved around the Church:

That still in school I betrayed you, / setting off on a breakneck expedition  
to the land of intellect, / where no baldachin floats over the heads of the  
shuffling, faithful crowd on Corpus Christi, / and no garlands of greenery  
decorate the interiors of the parish church. (5-8)

It was all worth it, though, he suggests, for this is what made him a poet, this is what allowed him, later in life, to immortalize them and theirs in his writings:

Moonish emptinesses, loneliness and anger / turn out to be necessary after  
all, / so that I could raise to a second power / my home region and you, my  
shadows, / who gather round at my call, / and only because I was a man  
with a stain, / cast out from the habits of my fathers, / marked out for  
another sort of fidelity. (9-16)

Here, perhaps no differently than in the papal ode, it is not so much “infidelity” as “another sort of fidelity.” This might lead us back to the question of the sacerdotal and prophetic character of the poet. However, I think it more indicative of the gnostic tendency to pretend to a secret knowledge, another faith hidden from the world. This is as old as the dualists of St. Augustine’s days (and earlier, two centuries earlier than that), and at the same time as modern or “progressive” as the postmodernists of our own day and age: there are different paths to the top of the mountain (we can almost hear the tinkle of prayer bells in an incense-filled basement apartment), and the poet who once castigated the modern world as being incapable of Christian faith, here shows that same incapacity—at least in special cases—as nothing to get too excited about.

From time to time we have had occasion to touch upon the idea of the sacerdotal quality of the Polish bard, to which Miłosz at times aspires, but which just as frequently he rejects. It should be no surprise then to find that one of the personae he assumes in this last period of creativity, when his interest in things theological came strongly to the fore, was that of a priest. Father Seweryn, the protagonist of eleven poems in the first person that make up the cycle *Książd Seweryn* (from *Druga prezstrzeń*), is really just Miłosz in a dog collar. The concluding lines of the first poem, “Kawki na wieży” [“Jackdaws on a Tower”] perfectly expresses the darker aspect of the desperate faith we have seen the poet express in earlier poems, and which, though determined to be firm, is still shot through with a fatal pessimism:

And would I indeed dare to confess to them, that I am a priest without  
faith, / that I pray every day for the grace of understanding, / although  
within me there is only the hope of hope? / There are days, when people

seem to dance / on the edge of the vacuum like a ball of marionettes. / And the suffering of the Son of Man on the Cross / is only so that the world might have occasion to display its indifference. (12-18)

The concluding two lines of this poem are full of the poetic vigor of Miłosz's greatest verse. Yet they are somewhat of a contradiction—how can they be expressed by a person truly lacking in faith? Why should the indifference of the world bother a person, who himself has no faith in the object of their disregard, their unconcern? The first section of the poem shows us that it is not necessarily a conviction of nihilism at the base of Fr. Seweryn's problem, but a disconnection between him and his God:

The jackdaws sit on a tower beneath my window. / Another year has come round, and nothing has come of my resolutions. / The cities are ever more populated in the garishness of the west. / A waiting for the end, just like then in Antioch, Rome and Alexandria. / We have been given a promise, but that was two thousand years ago. / And You have not returned, Redeemer, Teacher. (1-6)

Is this a priest talking? A person who finished six years of rigorous schooling? The *sic probo* contained in lines 4-6—"You said you were coming back, well, it's been two thousand years... I guess there's no sense in waiting any more"—has all the force of a crisis of faith as experienced by a newly agnostic middle schooler. The reference to parousia delayed *does* however take on a strong eloquence from its context. Fr. Seweryn's problem is that the Christ he once knew personally, Whom he loved so as to follow Him into the priesthood, has seemingly gone away from him, and year after year, the priest has vainly awaited the hoped-for, personal second coming. In this sense, the expression, the charge laid against Christ for His absence, is just as genuine and worthy our respect as that found in the verses of a truly mystical poet such as Gerard Manley Hopkins, with his "Comforter, where, where is Your comforting?"

The problem, for both Miłosz and Fr. Seweryn, is that neither of them is a mystic. For them, and for the rest of us, besides the Eucharist, God is to be found primarily in our communion with our fellow believers, and the isolation and meditation of the inspired mystic is not only not the path to be tread by the masses, but a path to perdition for those uncalled to it and strengthened with the necessary grace.<sup>42</sup> The poem continues:

Your sign was laid upon me and I was sent forth to serve. / I have come to know the weight of liturgical robes / and masks cast in a benevolent smile. / They come to me and make me touch their wounds, / their fear of death and the wretchedness of the passage of time. (7-11)

And thus, the more telling disconnection is between Fr. Seweryn and the people he has been called to care for, and to be cared for by, in turn. He has mistakenly oriented himself too much toward the vicariate (with a small “v,” of course) of Christ—*Your sign was lain upon me and I was sent forth to serve*—and when he felt that his shoulders were too weak to bear the weight of the office he believed himself charged with, he found himself unable to be the small, but no less important, bridge between man and God that each and every less pretentious and grandiose parish priest is. It is almost as if he had a faulty understanding of what the priesthood is: the sort of misunderstanding common among many non-Catholics unfamiliar with the theology of the Sacrifice of the Mass, or the sacrament of confession. Rather than realizing that it is God, through him as merely an instrument, Who effects the Eucharistic miracle and absolves the sin, Seweryn seems to suspect that it is *he* who works these things, and when his human reason convicts him, as it should, of the wrongness of these faulty heroic notions, he doubts in the reality of the sacraments altogether, and is paralyzed.

Too much time alone, so many fruitless hours spent in contemplation of things too profound for his particular intellect. Whereas, had he tossed aside both mystical and theological pretensions and concentrated on the communal pastoral life, to which priests are also called, he would not only serve his flock, but learn from them in turn. In the next poem, “Teofil,” we read:

Teofil's incurable disease. / His piety, fervent enough and to spare. / In his prayers every day is renewed / the mercy of God, His care and love. / But I, when I gaze upon that cruelty / of fate, or predestination from time immemorial, / suffer. I am a hypocrite by choice, / for I want to protect him from unfaith. / And they are all like him. (1-9)

It is not for him to teach Teofil about faith,<sup>43</sup> but in this case, Teofil is a grace sent by God to teach *him*, if he only realized it. At least, no matter his own problem, he struggles valiantly on in his office:

Out of pity for them, / we sing songs and play to Jahwe, / may a powerful fortress for believing hearts / arise from our voices. / I simply can't comprehend, why, whence in me / is this my unity with them—perhaps divine? (9-14)

and is surprised at the resulting sense of identity, the sense of unity with a fellow human being, based in good measure—no surprise here!—on suffering. And that dogged determination to keep building that fortress of

faith for others (now his faithless priest is inside those defensive walls he spoke so disparagingly of in the papal ode), this work of faith should result in the edification of his own.

Thus, a desperate faith, the determination to believe despite it all, is a grace in and of itself. We needn't plumb too deeply into the theology of justification and prevenient grace to be able to state that the cooperation of the human subject is no less necessary for its obtaining, and that in performing faithful acts, Seweryn is "constructing," for lack of a better word, and to avoid the problematical term "deserving of," the faith he seems to lack. And so, when he says in "Kasia" (verse 3 of the cycle), "I elevate the bread and wine at the altar. / Humbly, for my reason will not divine just why," 21-22, it is not important that he understand, it is important that he continue, day after day, to celebrate the Mass, to elevate the elements. This too, in a brilliant manner, underscores the importance of the priest in Catholic ritual. Even if he is not himself deserving, seemingly, anything of the Mass, he is celebrating a valid Eucharist nevertheless, *ex opere operando*, for the people in the pews. This was decided over six centuries ago.

And can this not be extended to the "priesthood" of the believers? Do good, act faithfully, without worrying about the large questions, leaving them in God's hands, and bringing the God we cannot understand, despite our weakness, to others, through our physical works? Again we are reminded of Eliot's beautiful prayer: "Teach us to care and not to care. / Teach us to sit still."

Father Seweryn does understand this, if perhaps only at a subconscious level. But it is a pity he is unable to place it before his conscious mind. Otherwise, Kasia's questions wouldn't bother him so, wouldn't lead him to absurd conclusions (intellectual lightweight that he is):

I don't understand why it had to be that way, / why the Son of God had to die on a cross? / no one has answered that question. / How can I explain it to Kasia? / She read somewhere that the Majesty of the Creator / was insulted, in a manner that demanded blood. / How can that be? In golden robes and crown / did He look down on the butchery from beyond the clouds? / I say to her: the Mystery of Redemption. / But Kasia does not want to be saved / at the price of the torture of an innocent man. //...// Pallas Athena was our lady. / We sent forth messengers to the oracle in Delphi. / We went in procession to Diana in Ephesus. / That's how it ought to be. And the philosophers / did not deny the divinities the homage they deserved. (1-11; 16-20)

There are indeed a few good, orthodox, explanations of the Sacrifice on Calvary, any one of which a priest might bring forward to explain the paradox of the Crucifixion on Good Friday, without which, after all, there would be no empty tomb on Sunday. Perhaps none of them would be “convincing” to poor, goodhearted Kasia. At bottom, though, her questions, and Fr. Seweryn’s brain-wracking, have just as much sense as if they were wondering why we can’t breathe under water. This is simply *how it is*. This is the way the world has worked out. Redemption is a mystery, certainly. Its incomprehensibility is no argument against its reality, which must be accepted, as is. What is really surprising, and really sad, too, is Fr. Seweryn’s (near) preference for the logical falsehoods of paganism over the illogical truths of Christianity!<sup>44</sup> Once more, we see the hyper-intellectualism that mars so much of Miłosz’s religious thought raise its ugly head, fortunately counteracted here by the priest’s dogged observance of Catholic ritual.

We have already introduced other of the poems of this cycle, such as number four, “Jak mogłeś,” the flatness of which, so repetitive not only of Miłosz’s earlier angst, but immature dualistic thinking itself, is hardly justified by its placement in a dramatic cycle such as this. But perhaps “dramatic” is a poor word choice here, as it does not really describe Ksiądz Seweryn. Drama, etymologically and generically, indicates movement. The sort of movement that we have in the greatest poetic cycle ever written in Polish, Jan Kochanowski’s *Treny* [*Threnodies*], in which the process of a father dealing with the death of his little girl, from anger and despair through resentment, resignation, acceptance, to trust, is beautifully modeled in the space of some twenty classical elegies. There is no such movement in Ksiądz Seweryn, no development. We are constantly spinning our wheels in one rut: that of his metaphysical uncertainty. Verse nine, “A jeżeli” [“And if”], considers the question, what if it all is just really a dream?

And if no one is responsible for our delusion / which we take with us when  
we go under the earth, / awaiting our elevation by Eternal Righteousness?  
(4-6)

Questions like this lead him to a barely-concealed distaste for those who accept the simple teachings of the Church, which are at once too simplistic for him, and too far beyond his comprehension:

In the confessional, I hear from Leonia / that she is afraid of damnation,  
but that it would only be just. / If you don’t suffer it through, she says,  
during life, / you’re going to have to, buddy, after your death.<sup>45</sup> // Here

comes Leonia. The sulphurous flames / of the lake just past the Gates of Hell are roaring. (8:3-8)

Finally, his confusion does not culminate in, but is balanced by, his desperate realization that, after all, things are in God's control, even though we cannot fathom His ways:

And so Constantine was only an unworthy instrument, / unconscious of what he was doing for people of far-off times? // And we, do we know what we are predestined to? (11. "Cesarz Konstantyn," 15-17)

It is sometimes suggested that a given poet has "lived too long." This statement is as poorly phrased as it is cruel—such a thing should never be said of any person. It is not wrong, however, to suggest that a given poet has written too much. When T.S. Eliot himself says that the most important thing for a poet to do "is to write as little as possible,"<sup>46</sup> this means that, both of out of respect for his readers and his own legacy, every poet should print only the freshest, newest, most worked-over and surest of his writings; the accomplished poet should get over, and get over quickly, the youthful inebriation of seeing himself in print and focus on quality and invention, development, above all. In looking through the latter poems of Czesław Miłosz, one gets the feeling that he, indeed, wrote too much. The same themes, the same figures, the same motifs occur again and again, especially in the volumes from *To* through the posthumous *Wiersze ostatnie*, rarely with more force or beauty than that with which they were first adorned in his earlier periods. From the standpoint of this essay, centering on the religious content of Miłosz's poetry, one wishes that, if *Książd Seweryn* had to be published, this would have been the poet's last foray into metaphysics with a Catholic tinge. For when it comes to his *Traktat teologiczny* [*Theological Tractate*, likewise from *Druga przestrzeń*], it only gets worse.

Before we get there, however, let us take a step back and consider Miłosz from the perspective of Dante, the patron of all truly Catholic letters. For, after all, in the sense of order with which the *Książd Seweryn* cycle comes to an end, Miłosz comes close to a recognition of the beatific vision transmitted us by Dante upon his "return" from his other-worldly journey.

In the volume *Dalsze okolice*, and thus from a work several years previous to *Książd Seweryn* and the *Traktat*, Miłosz directly addresses this greatest of the European poets in a poem entitled with his first name. There could be nothing further from the Dantean tradition than this verse:

For there to be nothing at all. Neither earth nor abyss. / The turning of the seasons. / Beneath the stars people / walk about and dissipate / in dust similar to starry dust. Molecular machines / working faultlessly, autonomously. / The *Lilium columbianum* opens its tiger-striped flowers, / which right away crumple into a sticky grease. / Trees grow vertically, straight up into the air. // You alchemist Alighieri, so far this / from your order, this absurd order, / the cosmos, of which I stand in awe and in which I die, / knowing nothing of the immortal soul, / staring at screens empty of people. (1-14)

This is not a contradiction of the universe as conceived by Catholicism and expressed by Dante, for even if Miłosz would prefer a totally materialistic world (how different that “starry dust” of his from the stars which bring each book of the *Comedy* to a close!), or some unregulated existence “without earth or abyss,” he implicitly acknowledges their reality.<sup>47</sup> Yet in the sentiments expressed in lines 10-14, with their suggestion that the poet’s experience of reality has taught him to doubt in the order of the universe, with which Dante calms his perturbed readers at the end of his masterwork, we have something just as bad: a rejection of the idea of God’s control and benevolence; an acknowledgement of the idea that evil is able to overcome good, chaos order (as indeed they already have done, for this narrator). This is something that will not surprise anyone familiar with a dualistic conception of reality, and in expressing it, Miłosz effectively sets himself up as the anti-Dante. This is acknowledged further on, when the narrator inserts his familiar eroticism into the mix:

Tiny, gaily-colored slippers, ribbons, rings / are still sold on the bridge over the Arno. / I select a present for Teodora, / Elwira, Julia, whatever the name / of her I’m sleeping with and playing with at chess. / In the bathroom, sitting down on the edge of the bathtub, / I gaze at her, fleshy in the greenish water. / Not at her, but at the universal nakedness subtracted from us, / from which we are separated, living next to. / Ideas, words, feelings abandon us / as if our ancestors were of another species. / It is ever more difficult to compose erotic *canzone*, / wedding songs, solemn music. (15-27)

Dante had his Beatrice. Miłosz’s narrator has his “Teodora, Elwira, Julia, or whatever her name is, who he’s currently sleeping with and playing with at chess.” This is a complete destruction of the idea of erotic love and its significance. Beatrice is Dante’s *donna ideale*—which idea, *nota bene*, excludes physical possession—yet she is never abstracted, never loses her individuality as a real person. In loving her, a real man



loving a real woman, according to Christian Neoplatonic thought, Dante is better able to understand the love of Christ for the individual soul. Participation in Christ's love for mankind is arrived at, or at least is better comprehended, through an exclusive love of two created, concrete, individual beings. This system is entirely undermined by Miłosz's eroticism, in which exclusive love, which does often include sex but which must be so much more, is replaced by an unconcerned lust after bestial pleasures, for which any old hole will do, to speak as roughly as the narrator with his depersonalizing of "whatever her name might be." And there is no fudging on this, no Don Giovannish chase after the absolute in accumulation. For if every woman is "the only" woman, any "love" that one experiences in this truly misogynist adventure is love of no individual, but of some misty, mystical archetype (and thus no love at all, for love can only be directed at one person, exclusively). And thus, paradoxically, the inability to truly love one woman negates the ability to love woman as an ideal. And further, the impossibility of human love, even carnal love, which is so important in the *Divine Comedy*, negates the "love that moves the planets and the stars," i.e. the love of God, the order of the cosmos, and we are back where we began. Miłosz's cosmos seems to have nothing in common with the cosmos as described by Dante, because Miłosz is the contradiction of Dante.

Here we stop. We have already cited the final seven lines of this poem, which again are impossible to accept, for the reasons given above. They are cynical, or at least highly curious, in that the poet seeks there the approbation of Dante, whom he earlier, and throughout the poem, rejects.

As far as the *Traktat teologiczny* is concerned, Miłosz's narrator tells us that he determined to write it suddenly when,

Driving onto the bypass one day, where one lane / leads to San Francisco,  
and the other to Sacramento, // he thought that some day he must write a  
theological / tract, in order to redeem his sin / of selfish pride. (2: 13-17)

The cynical reader might smirk that this is quite a fitting motivation for Miłosz—rather than unburdening his "selfish pride" as any normal person might, in the confessional, he feels called to write a "theological tract." This, it seems, is his only qualification for so doing. Even worse, as the tract plays out, we see very little of the promised movement towards humility, and more and more an immurement in pride:

Maybe I was like a monk in a forest-enclosed cloister, / who, observing the  
floodwaters of the river through his window, / composed his tract in Latin,

in a language incomprehensible / to the villagers in their sheepskin coats  
(3: 6-9)

In these lines it is not difficult to feel a touch of disdain for those “villagers.” The term *wieśniacy* in Polish contains a pejorative charge absent from the English words, as the detail of their rough, sheepskin coats is hardly picturesque, but rather indicative of a low, boorish culture.

As the poem continues:

And how laughable, amidst the crooked wooden fences of the little town, /  
where chickens scratch in the center of the dusty road / to deliberate the  
esthetics of Baudelaire! (3:10-12)

What may have been intended as a self-deprecating swipe at his own provincial, puffed-up nature as a youth, is also a broad swipe at the province itself. As if discussions of Baudelaire were only to be reserved for the elegant wits of the refined salons, certainly not to be dragged about on dirt roads by country bumpkins.

Passing by the rather *gauche* nature of this unflattering attitude, what is it indicative of, in a philosophical sense, if not that old-fashioned elitist gnosticism, in which the initiate adept is closer to salvation, indeed better off spiritually, than the “dark” masses of those who do not share in his dubious hidden “wisdom?” Miłosz’s narrator admits as much in the third to last verse in the collection:

So as to, finally, reveal myself as the inheritor of the mystical lodges / and  
also as a man different from the one found in the legend. //...// I learned to  
bear misfortune as one bears a crippled limb. / But my readers could only  
infrequently discover that in my writing. // Only a dark tone, and a frailty  
for a peculiar, / almost manichean, sect of Christianity, / could lead them to  
the right path. (21: 1-2; 12-16)

The poem starts off with what appears to be a parting of the curtains surrounding his inner self<sup>48</sup>—this is what my “legend” says, but this is who I really am. And who might that be? A confessor to that adult game of mystical dress-up that is membership in “mystical” lodges, a sensitive human sufferer who learns to bear the sorrows of life by realizing history, not in a Christian sense, but in the dualistic tango of a god of light and god of darkness; this is the key to his poetry. Reading this, published a scant two years before his death, the reader wonders, just when was it that Miłosz began to strive to express Catholic orthodoxy in his works? If there is any truth to the statement recorded in his letter to the Pope, he must either be referring to his non-poetical works, or to a change of heart that

came upon him after 2002. For this *Traktat teologiczny* is, through and through, a most un-Catholic script.

It is un-Catholic, because Miłosz has rejected, not only Dante, but centuries of Catholic theological tradition. He declares himself, literally and by implication, unsatisfied with orthodox explanations of questions such as the place of evil in a world created good by a good God (the problem which most, *ad nauseam lectoris*, nags him) and this has pushed him towards cabal and gnosticism:

Not out of frivolity, esteemed theologians, / have I busied myself with the  
secret knowledge of many a century—/ but from a heartfelt anguish,  
gazing upon the horridness of the world. // If God is omnipotent, he can  
allow for that, / but only as long as we assume that He is not good. // And  
thus, the boundaries of His might, and why the order of the world / is such,  
and no other, is what / hermeticists, cabbalists, alchemists, knights of the  
Rosy Cross, have striven to define. (9: 1-8)

Miłosz's God is not the God of trinitarian theology, but an image derived from Blake and Baroque heterodoxy:

Even if in the former-world there existed entire hosts / of invisible angels,  
only one of them, / manifesting his free will, rebelled / and thus became  
the hetman of the rebellion. // It is not precisely known, if this was the first  
and most perfect / of the beings conjured into existence, / or on the other  
hand the dark side of the Divinity itself / which Jakub Böhme called the  
Divine Anger. (10: 5-12)

Of course, the “mystery” spoken of here is quite well “known” to the Catholic tradition; whether or not it is acceptable to Czesław Miłosz is another question entirely.

Also Blakean is the upturning of good and evil, virtue and sin, and the nature of God's entry into history as the Incarnate Word, which we find in “Nie można się dziwić” [“It's not surprising at all”]. Here, Miłosz and his narrator return to his beloved tinkering with Eden and Genesis:

It looks as if Original Sin / was a promethean fantasy of humanity, / a  
being so talented, that by the force of his mind / he would create  
civilization and discover a medicine against death. // And that the new  
Adam, Christ, took upon Himself a body and died, / so as to liberate us  
from promethean pride. (13: 9-14)

Once again—original sin becomes “original virtue” in that it was necessary for man's progress, man's full humanization, and Christ becomes

incarnate and dies on the Cross, not to redeem man from sin, but to “free” him from “Promethean pride”—which threatens the Godhead (!)—and thus Miłosz’s Christ is the villain Christ of Blake, who comes to “bind” good energy and stifle man, to dispossess man of the dangerous pride which, despite it all, the narrator values and would not like to lose after all.

The sort of religion that is described in *Traktat teologiczny* is unacceptable to the Protestant, as well as the Catholic, mind, solely on the basis of its pedigree. The *sola scriptura* crowd will find much of his theosophical (to employ a more fitting term than “theological”) meanderings decidedly un-scriptural. The Catholics, who see revelation as emanating from two fountainheads, Scripture and Tradition, will find three extra-evangelical sources cited in Miłosz’s work. They are not Augustine, Ambrose and Aquinas, but rather the aforementioned William Blake, the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz, and Emmanuel Swedenborg (to whom Miłosz was introduced by his Uncle Oscar’s predilections). Hardly the same league.

They laughed at me for my Swedenborgs and other anabases, / because I moved beyond the regulations / of literary fashion. (7: 9-11)

Perhaps there were other reasons, extra-literary ones? Yet,

I derived certain advantages from reading Swedenborg, // According to which no sentence falls from above, // and the souls of the dead are drawn as if by a magnet to similar souls // by their *karma*, just as we see it among the Buddhists. // I feel in myself so much unrevealed evil, / that I do not discount the possibility of my going to Hell. // It would certainly be the Hell of the artists, // that is, of the people who set the perfection of their work // above their responsibilities as spouses, fathers, / brothers and co-citizens. (19: 10-19)

It is striking, the aplomb with which Miłosz’s narrator speaks of damnation here. It is, of course, a very comfortable Hell, which, in a Blakean turn on the *Academia infernorum* which Dante came to reject, seems more of a reward than a punishment; quite logically, after all, given the equivocal manner in which he balances the responsibility of human interaction with “perfect art.”

Perhaps it is all nothing more than a literary game? After all, poetry, according to the poet of the *Traktat teologiczny*, is a disguising of the truth, not its uncovering:

Mickiewicz always appealed to me, but I never knew why. // Until I came to understand that he wrote in code, and that such is the nature of poetry, / the distance between what one knows, / and what one reveals.<sup>49</sup> (7: 1-4)

So again we ask, just where is that latter-day turn toward orthodoxy? Even if this strategy is somewhat (somewhat) similar to the objective correlative, that distance did not stop Eliot from expressing himself in a consistently Christian manner. Perhaps the crux of the matter is in this, that Eliot consistently *removes* his own personality from his poetic statement, whereas Miłosz cannot help but to underscore his own. For this reason, then, he has resort to the gnostic hide-and-seek described above, the dubitable strategy of “inner orthodoxy,” this eating of the cake and wanting it whole.

To continue, what spiritual advantage, not to say comfort, is to be derived from a “theological tract” written by a person who admits:

I am not, nor do I want to be, a possessor of the truth. // Wandering about the edges of heresy suits me just fine. // In order to avoid what others call the peace of faith, / which is nothing more than simple self-satisfaction. (3: 1-4)

We are indeed a long way from Dante, who himself was no theologian, but as a poet was able to express Catholic thought through poetry because of a really orthodox, faithful, theological erudition, which Miłosz lacks, for his metaphysical thought is infected by, if not based on a distrust of, Catholic thought that leads him now to heresy, now to the edge of nihilism.

It is no odd thing that Miłosz’s spiritual sources should be more literary than theological. He is, as we have seen, obsessed with the spoken word, the vessel of comprehension, and this, as the poem continues, allows him to state, “My Polish coreligionists liked the words of the ecclesial ceremony, / but they did not like theology,” 3: 5-6. And rightly so! For what good is theology to the man or woman, boy or girl, in the pew, who can guide his or her life safely enough by assenting to the Nicene Creed, the ten commandments, and who comes to Mass not to learn about Christ, as at a lecture, but to meet Him, really, in the Sacrament of the Altar?

And thus, in the poem that begins with the sarcastic line “Excuse me, reverend theologians, for this tone so ill becoming / of the violet of your robes,” 4: 1-2, we read:

Catholic dogmas are as if a few centimeters / too high. We get up on our tippy-toes and then, / for a brief moment, it seems to us as if we can see. // But the mystery of the Holy Trinity, the mystery of Original / Sin and the mystery of Redemption / are armored against the reason. // Which vainly strives to learn about the history / of God before the creation of the world, and about when / in His Kingdom there occurred the split into good and evil. // And what of all this can the little girls in white dresses / approaching First Holy Communion, understand? (4: 11-21)

Again, how much, really, *do* they need to know about such things? The poet, who once said through his Father Seweryn, "I want to forget about the masterful palaces built by theologians. / For you are not a metaphysician," "Obecność," 7-8, is no longer in the mood to forget the relative unimportance of theological argument in favor of God's presence. He continues:

Although even for gray-haired theologians it is a bit too much. / So they close the tome, and appeal to / the insufficiency of human language(4: 22-24)

forgetting as well that the problem is not so much *to express* (*exprimo*) as it is *to comprehend* (*intellego*), and that an "escape" to ending a fruitless argument with "this is a mystery that cannot be comprehended" is in itself a type of knowledge, and more salutary, more reverent, than reaching for Jakub Böhme or Rosicrucian babble to sort out the unsortable. The poem ends with the no less sarcastic lines, "However, this is not a sufficient reason / to chirp about the sweet little Child Jesus in the hay," 4: 25-26, which again reveals his elitist distaste for the (ultimately Franciscan) expressions of folk piety, as do his references to the Mother of God, which play right into the hands of those who would (so wrongly) accuse Catholics of Mariolatry:

Accustomed to turn for help to the Mother of God, / only with difficulty did I recognize her / in the Goddess elevated onto the gold of the altars. (3: 14-16)

The entire *Traktat* concludes with a Marian coda, no less unpleasant than this expressed above:

I begged You for a miracle, but I was aware of the fact, // that I come from a country, where Your sanctuaries serve / the strengthening of national delusions and flight / beneath Your protection, you pagan goddess, / before the invasion of the enemy. // My presence here was muddied // by the duty of a poet, who should not fawn before / folk imaginings. // Yet who wishes

to remain faithful to Your inscrutable // appearance to the children in Lourdes and Fatima. (23: 14-23)

Again, such pride breathes forth from these lines! Even in the seeming return to the familiar, childlike faith we have seen before, Miłosz's narrator can still stand above the crowds of Mary's supplicants, read their intentions and judge their approach, from the secure and highly-placed position of the poetic mystagogue. Who is to say, anyway, that the children in Lourdes and Fatima understood, as he would have liked them to? Who is to say that the simplicity of heart that he seems to value in them is any different from the simplicity of heart of the "folk" of his nation he seems to despise? The keynote of much of Miłosz's "theological" thought, as well as his poetic expression, is subjectivism.

In the fifth poem of the cycle, "Obciążenie" ["The Burden"], Miłosz presents us with an odd *mélange* of who he was, and who he was taken to be, on this side of the Atlantic:

However, I never allied myself with those enemies / of the Enlightenment,  
who hear the devil speaking / the language of liberalism and tolerance for  
dissenters of all other faiths. // Unfortunately, the American cliché was  
used in reference to me, / with an unfriendly intent, after all: / "Once a  
Catholic, always a Catholic." (5: 10-15)

The cynical reader of Czesław Miłosz's poetry might be tempted to chuckle at the charity of those unfriendly persons.

The problem with Miłosz's later poetry—and this is only an intensification of a quality that runs through much of his works—is that he strides carelessly into areas he was not intended, or perhaps qualified, to visit. In one of his very latest poems, "Historie ludzkie" ["Human histories," 2003, *Wiersze ostatnie*], he describes his poetic career thus:

If only I could be a chorus in the ancient theater, / appearing in stony robes  
/ in order to lament the deceptions of Destiny! / But my histories would not  
be monumental: / wrinkled bedsheets, broken vows, / petty little lies, used  
condoms. / And the words between her and him, such as are meant to  
wound, / so that the other felt like a piece of garbage trod into the earth, /  
stricken in the very most intimate sanctum of his dignity. (10-18)

The tragedy of Czesław Miłosz, if we may use such an exalted term as he introduces it, is that he didn't stick to this. Miłosz, in his theological meanderings, fell into the trap that swallows so many dilettantish poets. People who would never dare take paintbrush in hand, or place chisel next to marble, feel quite within their rights to try their hand at poetry, simply

because they can read and write. Similarly, theology is a profession best left to the professionals. Even among them we find not a few who go astray, too smart, too proud, for their own, and our, good. Such are the unlooked-for negative aspects of the march toward universal literacy.

The last verse of all in Miłosz's final collection bears the title "O zbawieniu." This title is a pun untranslatable into English, as *zbawienie* can mean both "salvation" and "deprivation" in Polish. It reads:

Deprived of goods and honors, / Deprived of happiness and care, /  
Deprived of life and endurance, / Saved.

On the one hand, it almost seems too easy. As we have noted earlier in our discussions, there is a tendency in Miłosz's apokatastatic thinking that suggests that being itself is ground enough for salvation. Here, one is saved by being cut loose from one's past. It seems more like *mokṣa* than redemption. Christians carry their individuality, i.e. their real history, with them even past the grave. It is their ticket to the very real places of Purgatory, Heaven, or, which God forbid, Hell.

On the other hand, this simple poem shares something with the Habsburg ritual for the interment of emperors in that it suggests a reduction of the individual to his essential, knowable and lovable nature as a poor creature of God:

Arrived at the iron gate of the Capuchin crypt the Lord Chamberlain  
knocked three times with his golden staff, whereupon a voice within  
demanded:

"Who knocks?"

"His Apostolic Majesty, the Emperor of Austria."

"Him I know not."

Again three raps of the staff, again the voice:

"Who knocks?"

"The King of Hungary."

"Him I know not."

Once more the same gesture, the same demand:

"Who knocks?"

"Franz Joseph, a poor sinner."

"Enter, then!"<sup>50</sup>

If this is the sort of deprivation Miłosz is talking about, more power to him. However, it is but one tiny verse of self-abnegation set against the colossus of his output, the common denominator of which is self-absorption. Since it was never published during the poet's life, and constitutes the final verse in the posthumous collection *Wiersze ostatnie*,



one is tempted to wonder here: who is infusing the poem with meaning? The poet, or the reader? Is it not possible that we are dealing with an unfinished poem, the last line of which, like the earlier lines, begins with *Zbawiony*, but was not completed by the poet? In which case, a felicitous trick of the Polish language leads the reader to set a full stop here: “deprived of all these unnecessary items, at last I am saved,” whereas the poet might have just been writing another self-centered lament “I’m deprived of this, and that, I’m deprived...” But to look at it this way would be hyper-cynical. And hardly Christian.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Collected in *Wiersze wszystkie*, p. 1359.

<sup>2</sup> See especially his consideration of the (for him) uncharacteristically open, and questioning nature of Sor Juana de la Cruz in the chapter “Conquista y Colonia” from *El laberinto de la soledad*.

<sup>3</sup> “Druga przestrzeń” can also be translated “second space.”

<sup>4</sup> This is our translation of the Polish version, given by Miłosz. The official English version is somewhat different, but retains the same misty, spiritualized expression against which Miłosz is protesting.

<sup>5</sup> Diminutive form, something like “little Adam,” although Adamek can also be a Polish surname.

<sup>6</sup> Again, even here we cannot help noticing contradictions. There is the suggestion that Hell is “nothingness,” i.e. annihilation of the sinner, which is quite out of sorts with Dante’s imaginings and Catholic doctrine. Also, the conclusion of the “emissary’s” speech, in which he suggests that Adamek will suffer “until he comes to the conclusion that he deserves no better,” is, on the one hand, a faint echo of Dante’s *Purgatorio*, in which souls who have passed through the full term of their sentence realize that they have paid their debt in full, and ascend into heaven of their own volition, as it were (but not before). In Adamek’s case, this might mean that an honest conviction of his reprobation will be enough to free him from his punishment. However, the Polish line can also be read to suggest no such cessation of pain. This, coupled with the idea of Hell as annihilation, can be taken to suggest that the “emissary” has not delivered Adamek at all, but only saved him for worse torment, or that Purgatory itself is eternal suffering “which gives the lie to divine goodness,” again a thought completely at odds with traditional thinking on the subject. We may choose to prefer the first reading.

<sup>7</sup> For those unfamiliar with the Catholic doctrine of the Communion of the Saints, in brief, it presents itself thus. The Church is tripartite: Church Triumphant (the saints in Heaven), the Church Suffering (the saved souls in Purgatory, who will one day be in heaven, once the penance for their sins which they did not complete during life has been fulfilled in that transitionary place of the blessed), and the Church Militant, the Church here on earth, struggling against temptation and sin, whose eternal fate is not yet certain, of course. As we here below invoke the

intercession of the saints in Heaven, who help us with their prayers in our daily lives, so are we encouraged to pray for the suffering souls in Purgatory. They can do nothing for themselves but suffer patiently and wait, but we, by our prayers on their behalf, can shorten the time of their penance. Once they get to Heaven, they will become saints, and can intercede on our behalf. It is thus a circle of active and efficacious love. The greatest literary evocation of this, of course, is Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

<sup>8</sup> Nor does he navigate them with too much success. The Marian themes of this poem jar violently against its erotic content (however gentle), and one wonders why he introduced them in the first place. Are they a (failed) attempt at shocking the bourgeois? Are they a veiled confession of his inability to grasp the significance of virginity—even in the case of *that* Virgin?

<sup>9</sup> Note the manner in which he makes almost species-like scientific distinctions between them in lines 6-7 under the general genus of “sexual partner.”

<sup>10</sup> This is one way of reading a very murky poem. The line that reads in Polish *Moje dziecko czy nie, nie pozwolę!* can be read: “Whether it’s my child or not, I won’t allow it,” as well as “Is it my child? Or not? I won’t allow it!” In this case, the speaker would be nobly protesting on behalf of someone other than himself. In the end, as we continue below, it is rather an indifferent point. The character of the narrator’s desired, ideal woman is what matters.

<sup>11</sup> The whole poem, if it is a finished product and can be said to have a narrative totality, has a dreamlike logic. That is to say, like dreams, it cannot be considered from a purely logical standpoint. What happens in the final three lines? Does he wake up and, relieved to find it all just a bad dream, bless the silence, the reality of the waking, nighttime world beneath the predicable stars? *Błogosławiona*, “blessed,” can modify the female noun *cisza* [“silence”]. But the word can also be used in reference to the composite woman who, as equivocal as she is, ends the poem with her triumphant elevation “in excelsis.” Or, is he, a la Philip Larkin, raising a hosannah to the silence, the stars “in excelsis?” Nothing in the grammar of the syntax of the text can help us here.

<sup>12</sup> Though, in all fairness to Hardy, the idea of abortion as cruel kindness to the child never appears in his poems.

<sup>13</sup> And, of course, offering prayers for them. This is both prophetic (“O Lord, spare Thy people...”) and a bit less altruistic than it might be, given the context: had he “described” them, and thus eternized them, we are given to conclude that the prayer would be irrelevant...

<sup>14</sup> And the contradiction of raising a prayer to a deity, who earlier has shown to be incapable of fulfilling the prayers of others.

<sup>15</sup> In both religion (*latreia*) and magic, the frail human agent seeks to obtain a boon from a more powerful, supernatural source. The religious person acknowledges his lowliness, requests a favor from God, and awaits the result of his prayer in the faithful conviction that his petition has been heard and will be answered according to God’s greater wisdom. In magic, the magician is theoretically in the driver’s seat. The supernatural object of his incantations has no choice but to obey his will. Cf. Ariel and Prospero in Shakespeare’s *Tempest* for a familiar example. Faustus

gets this all wrong at the get-go. Despite all his bluster, he “prays and sacrifices” to the devils (thus engaging in a perverted, black religion, not magic) and demeaning his human dignity at the same time.

<sup>16</sup> Interpretation, that is, not subjectivity. The Zen adept seeks to go *beyond* intellectualism and reason in order to reach *satori*.

<sup>17</sup> The presence of Hardyesque themes in Miłosz’s poetry is well worth the notice of the comparatist. Is not “Sens” a Polish retelling, of sorts, of Hardy’s “Hap”? I would be surprised to learn that there was a direct influence at work here. Rather, there is that sense of “something in the air” imbibed by both European pessimists, more, perhaps, to be expected of and excused in Miłosz, who suffered through more violence because of war than Hardy, who died before the onset of Hitlerism and Stalinism. But there is, after all, nothing new under the sun.

<sup>18</sup> A heavy accusation, admittedly. To speak precisely, Hardy, Arnold and Miłosz had profound spiritual sides to their personalities. Hardy was an admitted agnostic; Arnold remained a communicant of the Church of England although, as in poems like this, and the epyllion *Balder Dead*, expressing a nineteenth-century angst at the suspicion, that science had “found God out.” As for Miłosz, the syncretistic and gnostic opinions expressed in much of his poetry lead us to believe that, frequently, his poetic personae deny the Christian God.

<sup>19</sup> The verb *odprowiać* has a more ritual connotation than the English equivalent “to pray.” *Odprowiać* *modły* has a strong sense of communal prayer, celebration of liturgy, which is ironic in this context.

<sup>20</sup> See, so as not to belabor points already made, “Adam i Ewa” from *Dalsze okolice*, especially lines 8-14: “And that’s not all that Adam and Eve read, / propping the book on their naked knees. / Those castles! Those palaces! Those many-storied cities! / Planetary airports among pagodas! / They looked at one another, smiled, / but uncertainly (you *will* be, you *will* learn) / and Eve’s hand reached out for the apple.” Associated with this, and indicative of Miłosz’s idea of the necessity of sin, the impossibility of finally judging actions, and salvation by simple being, the lines ending verse V in the cycle *Czeladnik* [“The Journeyman” (*Druga przestrzeń*)]: “But I wouldn’t be able to make myself progress further in a confession of my entire life, / because evil and good would be woven through an egoistic work,” 16-17. Again we are reminded of Herbert’s ironic comment on the fall of communism. It seems that in Miłosz’s case, he had a stronger sense of independently existing right and wrong, and the objective moral hierarchy, as long as he had a subjective anti-system to protest against. With the fall of his old foe, he looks around in astonishment and something like panic for another wall to push against. Finding none, he gives in to relativism. One might equally say that he begins to to push against the only walls that remain, as far as authority is concerned—those of the Church. Is this contradiction, or a living development of his thought?

<sup>21</sup> From the volume *Hermes, pies i gwiazda* [*Hermes, Dog and Star*]. Herbert is right, of course—despite the help of the Communion of the Saints, which Dante prefigures as a chain of linked arms leading us upward, our eternal lot depends upon our own freely made choices; in this respect, we stand before God’s bench

alone. But Herbert, for sarcastic purposes, depicts this in brutal scenes that remind us of the selection platform at Auschwitz: "it is as they explain it to us / the scream of mothers from whom their children are torn / for as it appears / we are be saved singly," 17-20.

<sup>22</sup> In *Wiersze wszystkie*, printed as a stand-alone text, separate from the rest of the "final verses" collection.

<sup>23</sup> Despite his repetitiousness, and the lazy, prosaic meter his once tight line devolved into, perhaps under the influence of Blake's mystical writings.

<sup>24</sup> This is the second time in which "bedroom" is associated with "battlefield" in Miłosz's poetry. Whether as complement or contradiction, I am unable to say. Given the sometimes rapacious imagery used in the erotic verses, I am tempted to think that there is an implied link between sex and violence.

<sup>25</sup> See his blatant rejection of the magisterium in "W Tumanie" ["In a Blizzard"]: "There was, surely, somewhere, ecclesiastical rule. / But what good was it, since it led none of those wandering lost in the blizzard out to safety?" 7-8. This, right after his (sarcastically?) pious wish for a new Thomas Aquinas in lines 5-6. Again, unclear thinking, or something worse. Many people would say that the problem is not with the "ecclesiastical rulers" not stretching out a helping hand by extending the poor wandering souls the rescue line of Catholic teaching, but with the wanderers themselves, who reject the proffered rope. If Miłosz's narrator is pleading for a new Thomas Aquinas, is he yearning after a reinvigoration of clear, synthetic thought, or rather for some new authority to rise up and offer him a *different* summa than that of the Church, which would bypass whatever he finds uncomfortable in the one we already have?

<sup>26</sup> Unless his "entry" to the sacred precincts through the gates of heaven is a metaphorical entry, not a reward at the end of his life, but something akin to the way in which Goethe's Mephistopheles "drops in" on God for a chat from time to time. For what sort of heaven is it in which the "poor" drunkard has no hope of being cured?

<sup>27</sup> Like Miłosz, Origen himself is a man of contradictions. On the one hand, he played fast and loose with Matthew 25:41 so as to construct his unevangelical theory of the eternity of Heaven and temporality of Hell, while for some incomprehensible reason taking Matthew 19:12 literally and castrating himself. How much better off he would have been had he taken the first literally, and the *second* figuratively.

<sup>28</sup> The alcoholic's suggestion that he "simply can't not pray" can lead to a further, fruitless, discussion on free will and predestined dispositions. Prayer, after all, is a freely-willed action, and one that is frequently difficult to will oneself to. Otherwise, it is worthless. But what is worth anything at all, if predestination is true?

<sup>29</sup> The unusual neuter pronoun here refers to the "jedno" ["unity"] formed by the (as one would expect) sexual union of man and woman, as Miłosz considers the "nudity" of woman meeting man and reassuming the nature of the odd circular *ur-*beings of Platonic myth. Once more, Miłosz looks to Greece and the gnostic intellect to express a truth the Hebrew Christ describes so much more gracefully,

and humanly, in His words on the indissolubility of matrimony.

<sup>30</sup> Martin Luther has a beautiful image of God and the soul in which he compares God to a mother with her arms stretched wide. What child would *not* run gladly into that embrace? But there is no “must” here as in Miłosz; the union of God and man is still predicated upon the “child’s” movement to the inviting parent.

<sup>31</sup> Ira Sadoff, *History Matters. Contemporary Poetry on the Margins of American Culture* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009), p. 141. The chapter on Miłosz from which this citation comes is entitled “Czesław Miłosz: The Late Style.”

<sup>32</sup> In “Lokator” [“The Renter”], from the same theologically-themed *Druga przestzeń*, Miłosz tells the story of a Red Army officer who commits suicide out of guilt, a feeling which he first experienced in Lithuania, where he finally came into contact with a civilization grounded in a Christian-based immutable hierarchy of right and wrong. The poem acknowledges that hierarchy, but Miłosz’s narrator is unable to assent to anything more than the contemporary, fashionable replacement of Hell by the gentler idea of spiritual euthanasia: the total destruction of the person, his re-submergence into complete non-being: “It would be indecent to say that he was met by angelic choirs, although we have read in the Gospel: ‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice.’ // It would be more fitting to keep quiet about religion, if he disappeared without a trace in the millennia of the planet Earth, along with an immeasurable number of others, who did not obtain eternal comfort.” So much more satisfying, even in his case, than Dante’s condemnation of Virgil, simply for having had the bad luck of living before the coming of Christ. And yet, how much more truly Catholic is Dante’s devotion to theological truth, especially in the case of a person he loved so much.

<sup>33</sup> In verse 4 of the above-cited “Zywotnik,” he describes himself as “A Lithuanian Pole / The inhabitant of pagan fables and myths,” 13-14. In “Bogini” [“The Goddess,” from *Na brzegu rzeki*], he addresses “Gaia” as her “humble son,” 27.

<sup>34</sup> Again, the agnostic Różewicz is expressing quite good Christian sentiments in these lines—along with his (bitter?) contextualizing of them in tropes which mimic the priest’s words at the elevation of the Host at Mass. What Miłosz does not see (or refuses, in his pantheism), is that wolves ripping apart a stag are *not* acting evilly, a hawk swooping down on a rabbit is *not* sinning. Thugs who tear apart a mugging victim with knives and clubs and leave him to die *are* acting evilly; the cropduster in Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest* who time and again plunges from the sky to run down Cary Grant’s character *would be sinning*, if this was a real-life situation. A world without man is a world without evil. Is it also a world without good? No. Creation, the material world, is fundamentally good.

<sup>35</sup> Another interesting echo, this time of the Alcoholic Ascended. As that one “simply cannot not pray,” here God “simply cannot feel and think.” The role of imperative and predestination and law overriding simply *all* free will in the poetry of Czesław Miłosz deserves a monograph of its own.

<sup>36</sup> The poem concludes, in lines 31-33, with: “And just so much comes of this attack on the cat: / An Augustinian theological gimace, / With which, as You know madame, / It is difficult to walk about here on earth.”

<sup>37</sup> His case is sort of like that of the hardened sinner from Christian theology. It would be blasphemous to suggest that there are souls that Christ cannot save; no living person is ever beyond the pale of God's mercy, as long as he or she is still able to repent and choose the good. Theoretically, the very worst, the very blackest-stained soul, can be saved if he truly repents of his sins, weeps for them, and begs for the mercy of the Savior. The problem is familiar to all those with bad habits, though, for example, smokers. Some habits, including that of sinning, so ingrain themselves into our characters that they become part of us, and all but control our actions. Marlowe's Faust, who sees "Christ's blood streaming in the firmament" a moment before his death, knows, and is correct in stating, that "one drop would save [his] soul, half a drop!" But the smooth ruts of cowardice and sin that he has worn into the paths of his life throughout those twenty-four years of diabolical intercourse lead him inexorably to despair, and he hasn't the strength to pull out of them at the last moment.

<sup>38</sup> Why it is to William Blake, and not to Jesus Christ and the orthodox teachings of His dual nature, that Miłosz appeals here as an authority, cannot be understood except as yet more evidence of the poet's odd devotion to "heresy."

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Mark IX: 22-24: "But if Thou canst do any thing, have compassion on us, and help us. Jesus said unto him, "If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth." And straightaway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, "Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief." (King James translation).

<sup>40</sup> See Luke XVI.

<sup>41</sup> Again, in dealing with a poem like this, it seems near impossible *not* to identify the poet with the narrator. To suggest that Miłosz has created a narrative persona who also happens to be a poet, is splitting the hair a bit too finely.

<sup>42</sup> And yet, in the interview with Adam Michnik, in response to the question "What does the Church mean to you today?" Miłosz answered: "The Church is, above all, the sacrament. In other words, the Church is based on the mystery of the Eucharist, the mystery of transubstantiation and the Eucharist. In General, I find it hard to imagine Christianity outside of Catholicism, or, perhaps, the Orthodox Church. I'm not the slightest bit attracted to Protestantism." Haven, p. 126. Perhaps no quote can give us a better example of the radical disjunct between Miłosz the man, and Miłosz the poet. In turn, these words cast a harsh light on the difficulty the critic has in categorizing the poet's thought vis-à-vis religion.

<sup>43</sup> The line about the dying man's prayers being "fervent enough and to spare" is simply cruel.

<sup>44</sup> This is to apply Aristotle to theology in a way that his great student, St. Thomas Aquinas, never would. It is an echo of the poetics, in which, during a discussion of the plot of tragedy, Aristotle suggests that logical impossibilities are to be preferred before illogical possibilities.

<sup>45</sup> In Catholic theology, this truth refers to Purgatory, not Hell. Why the poet would have the priest falsify the sense of the confessional scene is beyond me. The Catholic reader *might* find the mistake on Leonia's part, and these lines, as well as the concluding lines, sarcastic. The non-Catholic reader will understand the lines as literally as they are written, and caricatures of Catholic theology will

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be subtly reinforced in his mind.

<sup>46</sup> In a conversation with William Empson, c. 1930, published in the latter's "Style of the Master" (1948) and quoted by Russell Kirk, p. 192.

<sup>47</sup> It is possible to interpret these lines in another way, as a description of the indescribable. Dante himself falters at a description of what he "saw" in Heaven (and is honest enough to admit it). However, the lines that follow make it irrelevant whether Miłosz is writing reverently here, or not.

<sup>48</sup> Again, "my readers." We are once more forced to choose between identifying the narrator with the poet, or accepting the rather far-fetched notion of a narrator with a poetic persona.

<sup>49</sup> Such poetics stand in complete opposition to those, for example, set forward by Paz: "El escritor es un hombre que no tiene más instrumento que las palabras. A diferencia de los útiles del artesano, del pintor y del músico, las palabras están henchidas de significaciones ambiguas y hasta contrarias. Usarlas quiere decir esclarecerlas, purificarlas, hacerlas de verdad instrumentos de nuestro pensar y no máscaras o aproximaciones." *El laberinto de la soledad*, p. 195.

<sup>50</sup> George R. Marek, *The Eagles Die* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 465.

## CHAPTER SIX

# MIŁOSZ'S INNER ORTHODOXY IN THE CONTEXT OF MODERN CATHOLIC POETS

From the start of our discussion, we have tried to dissociate the man Czesław Miłosz from the poetic personae of his narrators. On the one hand, this is the most honest critical path in the interpretation of literature, as not all verse is confessional, and not all artists employ their art as a vehicle of self-revelation. On the other hand, this has been due to the matter of Miłosz's "inner orthodoxy," so often mentioned in the preceding chapters, according to which Miłosz the poet sometimes expresses philosophical or theological points completely contrary to the beliefs held by Miłosz the man. In his essay "List półprywatny o poezji" ["A Semi-Private Letter Concerning Poetry"], Miłosz writes the following about the "dramatic forms of poetry:"

If I am to be blamed for encouraging mockery and a light tone, there's really nothing more to say. Artistic irony, as I understand it, is based above all on the abilities of the author to dress himself up in the skin of other people, and, when he writes in the first person, to speak as if it was not he who were speaking, but the person created by him.<sup>1</sup>

He goes on to compare this strategy to that of the Romantics, in which "the speaker is identified with the author, and vice versa. Byron felt compelled to say what he thought about his heroes, inserting whole fragments of personal, lyrical emergences, not abstracting from his own self for a moment."<sup>2</sup> This doesn't help us all that much. For if Miłosz has in mind the digressive epics of Byron and the Romantics (Pushkin in *Evgenii Onegin*, Mácha's *May* and Słowacki's *Beniowski* might also be added here), it is *always* apparent when the poet is speaking in his own voice; when it is Byron, for example, and when it is his "hero" Don Juan. The problem is with a poet such as Miłosz, in whose poetry, in so many



cases, the poet, the man, strongly suggests identification with the narrators, the personae, of his poems.

The “compartmentalization” of narrator and author in speaking of Miłosz’s poetry is not an easy thing to sustain. Aleksander Fiut suggests that Miłosz is playing a game with his readers, as he himself “questions the identity of the person who speaks in a poem as well as the distinctness of his act of enunciation;” it is often difficult to separate direct monologue from indirect and dramatic monologue:

The problem cannot simply be reduced to determining the distance between the implied author and the speaker. Miłosz undermines the tacit basis of that classification system, namely, the fact that in its reference to popular psychological and sociological knowledge that typology presumes the coherence of the human personality and homogeneity of character.<sup>3</sup>

This is precisely the difficulty we have in trying to draw forth the cogent philosophical portrait of this poet’s mind from the body of poetry he has created: in the poetry of Czesław Miłosz the distance between author and speaker often *cannot* be determined. For again, Miłosz is, after all, a poet who often invites critical identification with his narrators. In the case of a poet who uses the “lyrical I” (we are *not* speaking of poems with a clear dramatic persona, such as Father Seweryn, but poems such as the “Theological Tractate,” for example, where Miłosz invites the reader to imagine him speaking for himself) to voice mutually exclusive ideas, it is impossible to know for certain what he “really” believes. It becomes impossible to speak of a Catholic foundation of the poetry of a person who so often expresses non-Catholic, not to say anti-Catholic, thought in the lines of his verse. When, exactly, is he being ironic, and when not? Especially considering those last few volumes of verse published in the nineties and the early part of this century, it becomes impossible to square what we find there with his claim to have “striven to write poetry that should not depart from Catholic orthodoxy.”

One solution might be to discard the notion of “inner orthodoxy” entirely; to state that it is simply impossible to consider a man’s poetry apart from the man himself. Like it or not, common themes, repeated opinions and ideological hints, can be found weaving throughout the works of all poets who leave behind them a considerable body of work, and a careful comparison of these themes, an ordering of them, will lead the reader to a sense of the main streams of the writer’s thought, which more often than not will lead to a convincing, and consistent, philosophical portrait. This portrait becomes all the more clear when it can be set against the poet’s biography, as fraught with dangers and

pitfalls as biographical criticism can be. However, even without any in-depth familiarity with the events and happenings of the poet's life, the portrait of the poet's mind that emerges from such a study is nonetheless solid and palpable. The special challenges presented by the poetry of Czesław Miłosz, when looked at from a Catholic perspective, can be seen in higher relief when he is placed in the context of other, identifiably Catholic, poets of the modern era.

Let us begin with the father of them all, T.S. Eliot. Eliot's poetry, which begins with *Prufrock and Other Observations* of 1917 and stretches through his dramatic works, coming to a conclusion with his verse play *The Elder Statesman* of 1959, falls into two, uneven, comprehensible halves. *Prufrock, Poems 1920*, and, to some extent, *The Waste Land* of 1922 belong to his period of searching; religious themes abound in them, at times, in a mocking, ironic manner (witness, for example, "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service" or "The Hippopotamus" from *Poems*, and the caustic way that his "Preludes" from the *Prufrock* volume come to an end). His search for a spiritual home was not to end until 1927, when he was baptized into the Anglican Church, in the conviction that the Church of England was the Church *in* England, a local manifestation of the Catholic Church (along with Rome and Constantinople), for, as he puts it in *The Idea of a Christian Society*:

Certainly, no one today can defend the idea of a National Church, and without keeping in mind that truth is one and that theology has no frontiers [...] The allegiance of the individual to his own Church is secondary to his allegiance to the Universal Church. Unless the National Church is a part of the whole, it has no claim upon me.<sup>4</sup>

Poetically speaking, his writing was to crystallize around a certain number of truths that were to find constant and consistent expression in his lyrics and plays. One of these guiding principles was that of the spending of oneself on behalf of others. As early as 1922, when he was still wrestling with the vying attractions of orthodox Christianity and eastern theosophies like Hinduism and Buddhism, the rejection of self-centeredness for real action on behalf of others, occurs to him as the way out of the modern wasteland of spiritual and human aridity:

Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves  
 Waited for rain, while the black clouds  
 Gathered far distant, over Himavant.  
 The jungle crouched, humped in silence.  
 Then spoke the thunder  
 DA

*Datta*: what have we given?  
 My friend, blood shaking my heart  
 The awful daring of a moment's surrender  
 Which an age of prudence can never retract  
 [...]  
 Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.  
 Shantih shantih shantih  
 (*The Waste Land*, 395-401; 432-433)

*Give* (*datta*)—the outward, personally disinterested movement away from oneself, toward others in *sympathy* (*dayadhvam*) leads to *control* (*damyata*); control, not of another person, but of oneself: the taking of responsibility for oneself and one's actions, the active principle enabling one to overcome objectification and control *by* the wasteland, leads to the outpouring of the heavens on one's own patch of aridity, and the desert blooming in *the peace that passeth understanding* (*shantih*).

Certain themes hinted at here were to remain with Eliot throughout his purely Christian verses; themes such as the irrevocability of action, the eternal significance of the slightest actions (for evil or good), the realization of the effect that our actions have, not only on ourselves, but on others, and the imperative—in Eliot's case, heavily influenced by the *Bhagavadgita*—of disinterested action, acting out of a sense of responsibility toward what is right, regardless of the profit or loss to one's own interests that might result from it. This is what St. Thomas realizes in *Murder in the Cathedral*, and which helps him to overcome the most devious of the tempters:

This last temptation is the greatest treason:  
 To do the right deed for the wrong reason.  
 [...]  
 For those who serve the greater cause may make the cause serve them,  
 Still doing right.  
 (Part I)

It is the heart of his prayer in Canto VI of *Ash Wednesday*:

Blessèd sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain, spirit of the garden,  
 Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood  
 Teach us to care and not to care  
 Teach us to sit still  
 Even among these rocks,  
 Our peace in His will  
 And even among these rocks  
 Sister, mother

And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,  
Suffer me not to be separated

And let my cry come unto Thee.  
(VI:25-35)

It is the strong appeal to the readers of *The Four Quartets*, which runs throughout its pages:

And what is there to conquer  
By strength and submission, has already been discovered  
Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope  
To emulate—but there is no competition —  
There is only the fight to recover what has been lost  
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions  
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.  
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.  
(*East Coker*, V:11-18)

“And do not think on the fruit of the action.  
Fare forward.

O voyagers, O seamen,  
You who came to port, and you whose bodies  
Will suffer the trial and judgement of the sea,  
Or whatever event, this is your real destination.”  
So Krishna, as when he admonished Arjuna  
On the field of battle.

Not fare well,  
But fare forward, voyagers.  
(*The Dry Salvages*, III: 38-46)

This is what Eliot came to believe, and this is what he expressed in the lines of his poetry, repeatedly, consistently. Whether we identify Eliot the man with the first-person narrators of these lyrical lines or not, the message they express is consistent enough to create a strong philosophical portrait of Eliot's Christian thought.

This matter can be proven all the more if we consider his plays. Here, as in Browning's dramatic monologues or Byron's *Don Juan*, the poet's personality fades behind the fictional character who expresses the lines, as narrator. But Eliot's philosophy of time is palpably apparent in the lines spoken by Harry Monchese upon his return from the fatal ocean crossing during which he is certain that he pushed his wife overboard:

HARRY: But how can I explain, how can I explain to *you*?

You will understand less after I have explained it.  
 All that I could hope to make you understand  
 Is only events: not what has happened.  
 And people to whom nothing has ever happened  
 Cannot understand the importance of events.  
 [...]

You are all people  
 To whom nothing has happened, at most a continual impact  
 Of external events. You have gone through life in sleep,  
 Never woken to the nightmare. I tell you, life would be  
 unendurable  
 If you were wide awake.  
 (I:1)

Harry's family, who try to convince him of the insignificance of what occurred on board the ship,<sup>5</sup> are oblivious to any objective scheme of right and wrong. Whether they are atheists, agnostics, or nominal Christians, they have no inkling of what Eternity means. They only understand "events" in the stream of time. There was a wife, she was unwanted, she has passed away, and what belongs to the past should not be dragged into the present; move forward, forget the unpleasant incident, and—as Uncle Charles is brazen enough to suggest—thank your lucky stars for your deliverance. Eliot, on the other hand, as we have mentioned more than once, sees time as a continuum, which has only been infused with meaning by the shocking entrance of God into it, through the Incarnation. As he says in Chorus VII from *The Rock*:

Then came, at a predetermined moment, a moment in time and of time,  
 A moment not out of time, but in time, in what we call history: transecting,  
 bisecting the world of time, a moment in time but not like a moment of time,  
 A moment in time but time was made through that moment:  
     for without the meaning there is no time, and that moment of time  
     gave the meaning.  
 (VII:20-22)

Time has been given meaning by Bethlehem and Golgotha, and so have our individual actions, which must be oriented toward that brief, but crucial, period in human history when God walked upon the earth clothed in our flesh. The family members know only the stream of time; Harry is painfully aware of how the stream of time, made up of a succession of "events," informs one's individual fate in eternity: "what happened;" what

the family cannot grasp, is the significance of those actions, those "events."

This is the eternal moment, the axis around which so much of Eliot's poetry revolves, in which times are mixed, times are lost, for the stream of time will eventually disappear in eternity, bearing on its back all "events," but the *moral significance* of these events will always remain, "what happened" will always be. As the Chorus puts it in the same play, near the end of Act II, Scene 3: "the past is about to happen, and the future was long since settled."

Eliot puts an extremely high premium on the significance of one's actions. We all of us live constantly in this eternal moment of decision, and our decisions, as he reminds us in *The Cocktail Party*, affect not only ourselves, but others, as well. Just before Riley re-introduces Lavinia to Edward in Scene 3 of Act I, he says to him: "I have come to remind you—you have made a decision." When Edward replies to that with, "Are you thinking that I may have changed my mind?" Riley replies in a manner that perfectly illustrates the seamless garment of Eliot's thought, no matter the work, no matter the persona of the narrator:

No. You will not be ready to change your mind  
 Until you recover from having made a decision.  
 No. I have come to tell you that you will change your mind,  
 But that it will not matter. It will be too late.  
 [...]  
 You will change your mind, but you are not free.  
 Your moment of freedom was yesterday.  
 You made a decision. You set in motion  
 Forces in your life and in the lives of others  
 Which cannot be reversed.

There is no such strategy of inner orthodoxy, or strategic self-contradiction (in order to make contact with a disbelieving or self-contradictory world) in Eliot, as we have in Miłosz. No, regardless of Eliot's biography, regardless of how he may have contradicted his words in his *life* (I am speaking here hypothetically), the main thrust of his artistic expression is a consistent exposition of philosophical themes over time, so strong, that it is impossible to pick up a poem written by Eliot, say from *The Hollow Men* on, and not sense his mind behind it.

The same can be said of Jan Zahradníček, the great modern Catholic poet from Moravia. Zahradníček's life work is also divisible into clearly defined sections. This time, they are three: 1) the poems of his pre-war period, when he established himself as the successor, so to speak, of Jakub

Deml, 2) the totalitarian period, including the Nazi occupation of the Czech lands and the post-war Soviet occupation, up to his imprisonment, and 3) the poems written in prison, often in secret and smuggled out to family and friends. This period ends with his premature death in 1960, a few months after being released from prison.

While the personality of Jan Zahradníček is much more tangible in the works that he wrote than that of Eliot in his, he too cannot be described as a “confessional” poet. Even in the most intimate of his lyrics—such as the prison poems addressed to his wife or his children—he is ever aware of the presence of other eyes. His great, prophetic cycles, such as *La Saletta* and *Znamení moci* [*Sign of Power*], are admonitions to the world at large. But even those intimate lyrics, so revealing of a real husband’s love for his wife, a real father’s sorrow and concern for his real children, are imbued with a broad human appeal that goes beyond the particular; they are like the letters of St. Paul, really, which, though addressed to certain groups of particular people in Thessalonica or Ephesus, and addressing their particular concerns, are still read with great spiritual profit by people who can’t understand a word of Greek, and who may not even be able to find these places on the map.

Zahradníček, too, is a poet for whom the individual’s participation in a wider community, a communion, is paramount. His world-view is strongly Catholic; it imbues every fiber of his being, and for that reason, all of his expressions are due to reflect that *Weltanschauung*, again, in a very consistent way. Truly, this certainty of an organic participation in the human community, saved by Christ, is one of the major currents of Zahradníček’s thought, running throughout his poetic corpus from start to finish. We find it already in his very first volume of verse, *Pokušení smrti* [*The Temptation of Death*]. Already, decades before he was to witness the “apocalyptic” scenes of war and totalitarianism, he is interested in the end times, individual and general; like Eliot, he is impressed with the Catholic truth of temporal life as a preparation for eternal life, the “two paths” upon which we should tread here on earth. The verse cycle “Jejich stín” [“Their Shadow”] is an extended meditation on death and judgment. On the one hand, as first-person narrative, it expresses personal experience:

One day I grew terrified at my face that is to be. / The yellowish earth  
shaking its heron feathers of smoke / unfurled between the sad ribbons of  
forest / similar to the manifold palimpsest of my memory. (I: 1-4)

Yet it is a universal experience, at the same time:

The evening of evenings was drawing close // The wounds of stars were seeping through the veils of the clouds / Kneeling families were getting ready for sleep / and I, bearing the mystery of my face that is to be / passed by the ruined cathedrals of beggars' bodies in dread // And listening to the melodies of their barrel organs / I grew as sad as the cosmos / disclosing the marvelous relation / between history and my own destiny (I: 16-24)

The keywords here are *souvislosti* / dějin a svého osudu [“the relation / between history and my own destiny”]. The idea that man is so ensconced in the history of the world in which he lives, the soil from which he has sprung, that even so personal an event as one's death and the particular judgment that follows thereafter is modified and informed by the greater community of humanity—which he was to develop in *Znamení moci*—is signaled here in a way that echoes Dante's *Divina commedia*. Like the Florentine poet, Zahradníček's narrator finds himself in *una selva oscura*. But here, the woods are not endless wastes, but “ribbons” interspersed with clearings—an image of multiplicity and succession which, when coupled with the *mnohonásobný palimpsest* [“manifold palimpsest”] of his memory, suggests an interior wilderness: his past life, full of sin and good works, on the basis of which he will be judged.

The wider context of humanity enters with the families and the beggars—the latter of which he would like to avoid, but cannot—as indeed the experience he recounts in the cycle is not a wholly personal tale, applicable to himself only. No, as in the case of *The Divine Comedy*, Zahradníček's narrator is undergoing his journey on our behalf, too—the innumerable families and beggars—and the vision he gains from it will be transferred to us, for our benefit.

Because he is human, he carries us all in his body. His experience is ours, and the inheritance of the ages of humanity that have preceded him entrap him in the wonderful prison of the bodily senses:

You walk on and you are three times tempted by death at each step / You are three times tempted by death as you pluck the flower / You are three times tempted by death before you fully inhale the sweet aroma / You are three times tempted by death as you bring the apple close to your lips (II: 9-12)

I say “wonderful” prison of the bodily senses, because the somatic theology that informs Zahradníček's poetry from beginning to end is thoroughly Christian. He does not wish to destroy or overcome the senses, like a Buddhist; rather, he embraces them, and welcomes the pain they transmit, as pledges of the future bliss promised him by the Suffering Servant who underwent unimaginable pain on his, and our, behalf.



Bruised, you fill yourself with a terrible thirst for pain / and blooming with a sowing of wounds you wish to bear the cumber of birth / Pain! sob the destroyed mouths of the flowers / Pain! Pain! whisper the stalks of the black rains // May the uniform of all occupations fall from me / burned through by the stars of my scars / Sorrowfully I return, backwards, through life / a pauper exceedingly aged (II: 17-24)

The reality of the eternal dimension of our lives, the ancient Christian conviction that this world is something of an obstacle course, which must be overcome in order to win the prize of heaven, the squarely Christian anthropology which sees fallen man as a defective being, who must overcome his constant inclinations to sin in order to finally triumph with that Christ Who both redeemed Him, and repaired the human nature that Adam and Eve damaged so deeply, is constantly present in Zahradníček's poetry. In the first canto of *La Saletta*, the first of his two great post-war prophetic sequences, he speaks of the Virgin's choice of the illiterate children to bear her message to the world:

She searched the world over, until she found / instead of good fortune, which does not exist, poverty / instead of sophistication, which does not exist, simplicity / she searched, until she found two children so poor / two children as poor as can be / and she began a conversation with them / about things that touch upon the blight of potatoes / just as much as the blight of cities and the fall of empires / about things that touch upon the entire world / just as much as it is touched by the alternation of night and day / and the inevitability of death (I: 96-103)

Of course, the blight of sin penetrates deepest among men and women. Still, the earth itself, and the works of human hands, all cry out in desperation at the state of existence debased, in anxious expectation of the Second Coming, or at least some heavenly relief, here and now:

It grew dark menacingly, the Easter radiance / smoldered out in the cloudy Calvaries, while down below / houses stood, the sweat of worry on the brows of their topmost walls / looking at one another window to window, they examined their unsure balance / their walls pained them from long standing, their posts from bearing weight / silently they shifted from foot to foot / envious of the trees, and when the wind drifted in / they muttered long from the depths of their gate-ways, staircases and passages / the muttered longing *Give us Christ!* and it sounded like weeping (II:1-8)

The ironic thing is that these objects, natural and artificial, are completely helpless; only man is provided with an active, free will. Yet he, despite his eyesight, is blind to the signs of the times; despite his hearing, he will

not listen to the anguish, or, if he does, pretends not to understand. "Those who dwelled within them explained it away as poor water pressure / unable to accept the fact that stones might take voice..." II:9-10.

In *La Saletta*, and in the somewhat later *Znamení moci*, his most famous work, unfinished at the time of his imprisonment by the communist authorities, Zahradníček speaks out with the voice of a prophet,<sup>6</sup> warning his brothers and sisters about the threat that is facing them; the significance of the difficult times in which they live. This too, it should be pointed out, springs from that same Christian conviction, that same Christian identity, of Zahradníček the man. He is not "taking on" the literary persona of an Old Testament prophet. He is being faithful to his Confirmation promises, being a soldier of Christ, speaking up, and to, his fellow men in defense of the truth. Thus, in *Znamení moci*, he is constantly forcing the eyes of his frightened society upon the truth of what they wish to avoid. No victim of the unjust régime is an unrelated stranger, easily ignored as "no concern of mine." Because every victim of the unjust régime is, on one level, an *alter Christus*.<sup>7</sup>

[...] in whatever alley past the corner / out of the public eye and yet not hidden enough / and all the same not furtively enough / they slowly disrobed Someone // It could be anyone, completely defenseless, one and yet all / it could be anyone, when he fell into their hands / he had neither form nor beauty / so that he would resemble for us all the more horribly / the Man of Sorrows. //...// Now or never, the world said / thinking the while of its last attempt at executing without witnesses / the poor Wretch whose blood was flowing from all sides / of the interrogated, denuded, and bludgeoned, / rolling about here and in the villages of cannibals / as the only valid currency / in the entire City of God (III: 57-64; V: 17-25)

Yet he will not be heeded, whether he is a prophet of Jeremiadic stature or the slight, but no less important, measure of the humblest of Christians, like Melanie and Maximin, to whom the Virgin appeared one hundred years before. Like Orwell and the Miłosz who quotes Orwell, Zahradníček reminds us that the abolition of man's historical sense, or its relativization, whether that happens programmatically, as it did in communist Eastern Europe, or insidiously, with the passive acceptance of postmodern thought in our own day and age, can lead only to man's enslavement, to his dehumanization:

And in that moment / I was terrified /at what had become of man /at what had become of his face / in which as I saw there was mirrored not the smallest part /of the twelfth hour of history which was about to arrive / In accordance with the wishes of the prophets of the Happy Animal / there was

emptiness before the eyes and emptiness behind the eyes // They couldn't grasp it / for them the past began such a very short while ago / with the holiday two years past / or with this year / when so many cockchafers hatched and father died (I: 67-74; VII:37-40)

The trivialization of history, so forcefully set forth in the concluding lines of this passage, in which the death of one's father carries the same significant weight as an unusual plague of insects, is a direct attack not only on the significance of time, but upon man's natural community with other men as well. The destruction of the commonality of objective history cuts out the ground between men and women, and divided, they are conquered:

Friendship went off, whole regions / were wiped out with a determined scribble / until all at once it was told them that they had never had a childhood / that they were never young, that they'll never grow old // In large crowds / each stood alone / without firm knowledge of his own birth / all the while death walked among them / on her rounds sweeping with them / the white canvas of the future / that ever nearer ever more real / only firm knowledge / that yet remained them... (I: 13-25)

And it is the community of man with man, on the basic level of their glorious humanity, that Zahradníček values most, after, of course, that un hoped for, radical, communion of man with God effected through Incarnation, and Holy Communion. That is the sense of those words in Canto III of *Znamení moci*, cited above, in which the poet expands the scope of his consideration past Brno, past Czechoslovakia and even Europe to the very antipodes, the "villages of cannibals." Christ came for all men; everywhere men are, Christ is; everywhere is potentially the City of God, and it is the promise given by Christ to all men, not just to Czechs or Europeans, not just to the nations enslaved behind the Iron Curtain, which fills Zahradníček with a sure confidence in the ultimate triumph of Christ over "Pan Nikdo" [Lord Nobody], of good over evil. This confidence is not only joyful, it seems almost superhuman considering its endurance even in the darkest days of his life, during his decade-long unjust imprisonment.

Zahradníček's confidence arises from two sources: the reality of good Nature, gift of God and ruled by Him and Him alone, which cannot be suppressed by any tyrant, and the reality of the community of men, which both goes beyond, and is an integral part of, that Nature. Consider, on the one hand, the poem "Pozdrav" ["Greetings"] from the prison verses collected in *Čtyři léta* [Four Years]:

I sent you greetings through the moon, / as it gazed at me through the window, through the bars. / Between us is stretched the rustling night, / on the other end, your window, past which you lie sleeping. // Between us is stretched the July night, / and in the depths of the night, the trees in the wind / branch by branch announce the words / that you whisper to the children as they fall asleep. // Between us is stretched this murmuring land, / land of pine-groves, rye, streams and thatched roofs. / So far away, as it is from you to me, / so close, that I feel her very breath... (1-12)

In a way that recalls to us the metaphysical poetry of John Donne, in which the physical “beams” of lover’s eyes entwine,<sup>8</sup> the earth, and the natural phenomena that make it up, stretch between the poet and his wife like an uninterrupted electrical current. She is not on another planet, the real earth beneath her feet unrolls unbroken all the way to his cell, and, in this way, their bodies touch. The wind that brushes her face reaches his as it passes between the bars of his cell window, and the moon that he gazes at is the same that she looks upon. All of these points of contact are real, material, not spiritualized, despite their ephemerality, and this striking emphasis on material contact is a very Catholic aspect of his poetry. For orthodox Christianity is a religion that emphasizes its foundation in reality, unlike Buddhism or gnosticism, in which the spirit takes such a precedence as to lead to a vituperation of matter as evil. In this way, Nature acts as a physical bridge between the imprisoned poet and his family. But his contact is wider than that. In the poem “Ve dvě hodiny v noci” [“Two o’clock in the Morning,” *Dům strach*], for example, the sound of a train trundling off in the night leads the poet to contemplate the passengers:

Meanwhile, a train with its cargo of passengers grows distant. / They are traveling somewhere, unknown, and worry is in their eyes. / But after all Sunday is about to dawn; the factories will be closed, the offices shut. / The court puts off its sentencing for a day... So with relief the sleepers relax / in their beds, on the benches of the train and in prisons, / all of them identical in this defenselessness of theirs, / in this need of comfort, this need of mercy. / And only the children smile in their aromatic slumber / still near Paradise. (15-23)

Everyone is “imprisoned” in this temporal life. Zarhadníček’s comparison of the travelers in their compartments, and the others in their bedrooms, is not a nasty turn of “misery loves company.” Rather—note that the mention of prisons comes last in the list—he is daring to pin himself and the other prisoners to the free people from whom they have been

separated, daring to emphasize their continued kinship to the family of man, which gives him hope.

And they are, we are, one after all. God's eye never sleeps; it continually scans the globe like the disk of light thrown on the interior walls of the Pantheon through the oculus in the center of the dome. Thus the poem ends with the beautiful, peaceful image of the infant Jesus cradling the world in His palm:

No one will ring at this moment. / It is silent in the city and silent in the fields, which extend to the forests / and beyond the forests begin again, country after country, without borders. / And everywhere, round about here, the living sleep, having set aside their burdens, / with their face towards the heavens. And little Jesus, who holds the world in His palm, / from the heights of His glory / smiles upon it, / as at least for this moment / He takes the reins in hand by Himself, decides Himself and governs / things small and immeasurable, the while the birds already sense the dawn, / one will hear genuflections, as the bell calls the faithful to the first Mass of the day. (28-38)

There is no such thing as a solitary confinement so strict that it would cut one off from God. This constant presence of Christ in the cell with the lonely condemned makes of the isolation cell—paradoxically and beautifully—a tabernacle on the altar of repose.

If, as Zahradníček says in “Uctívání Kříže” [“The Veneration of the Cross”], the central verse of this prison period, “My country and I. /.../ Both of us are crossbearers,” 33-34, and that *Via Dolorosa*, individual and universal, leads to the grave— “All the earth is God's grave,” 42, that grave is no final destination. Beyond Good Friday lies Easter Sunday when all that earth will be renewed, will be the City of God, where every tear will be wiped away. The Cross of Christ remains, as he puts it in *Znamení moci*, that “one sign of power over all the earth:”

The Cross stands still, while the earth spins. / With one arm stretched out to the West, the other arm stretched to the East, / thus extended, its shadow spreads throughout the planet, / through this old world from Kamchatka to Cap Verde, / through America between the two oceans. (“Uctívání Kříže,” 2-6)

The world spins on its contradictory, confused ways, yet the Cross stands still, the immobile, cosmic axle which makes of all places Calvary. It is a stroke of genius that had early Biblical exegetes locate Calvary at the center of Eden, and traditional iconographers to place a skull at the base of the Cross. That skull is Adam's skull, Adam, whom Christ came to redeem,

our father, us—our skull; wherever we are, there too is Christ's sacrifice, there too is Christ's infinite mercy:

And the Cross grows, the Cross grows, spreading wide its long shadow / through the continents. Through the oceans. Over the heads of the nations. / Over the worshippers of fire. Buddhists, marxists, shintoists. / Over the American sectarians and Catholic Christians. / All of these are touched by the hands of this cosmic clock, / which shows to all the time of the Kingdom of God, which is coming / with this gesture of gathering of two arms stretched widely, / with this slow hastening, / with which they approach each other... (43-51)

How beautifully and effortlessly does Zahradníček introduce us into the eternal moment in these lines. The arms of the Cross, which encompass all space in stretching forth east and west, become the hands of a clock, showing "God's time," i.e. the ubiquity of salvation in time, as well as space:

In the heat of suffering / hours, ages I gaze at it. / Its arms knock through the walls of the prison / right: far into the past, left: far into the future / and raise me aloft like two wings. / It is Friday. I stand on Calvary myself, with my Savior, / and it is like everything has passed away, and everything is yet to come about. / The measured ages of time, at the same time, are beginning, and at the same time are coming to an end / and everything is now, / and everything is here, / in this crossing of two beams. (62-72)

A few lines on, Zahradníček links the eternal moment with the extra-temporal space of the Mass. Each time the Holy Eucharist is celebrated, Christ's sacrifice on Calvary is not merely remembered, it is bloodlessly reenacted. In participating at the Lord's table, one is not merely receiving bread, one is touching, taking into oneself, the very Body of Christ that was stretched out upon the Cross:

The leaning wall of the world grown over by the vine of the Church. / In its shade, the nations genuflect as the Host is elevated, / and new voices join in ancient hymns. // Hail to Thee, o Cross. // How many eyes are turned towards you at this moment. / And you fill and nourish them all, / Pelican. And the Holy Grail of your side / spills a diamond stream over the entire cosmos. / A Mississippi of the heavenly firmament. Milky way... (97-107)

Zahradníček's eyes raised aloft do not present us with a saccharine nineteenth-century print of piety. Rather, his "cosmic" gaze, lifting himself, and his readers, out of the stream of time and particularized location present a perspective of the world, at all times, and with all of its

nations, in which all divisions vanish. Man, seen through this lens, cannot be separated into the individual camps that divide us, and all time—the extent of one’s life as well as one’s prison sentence—is lost in the only significant time of eternity, measured on the “cosmic clock” whose hands are those of the Cross.

This is Zahradníček’s Christian anthropology, which reduces—or rather expands—all men, of all continents, climes, and stages of cultural development, to the commonality of human beings created by a loving God, and redeemed by the blood of His Son. It is the most constant element in all of his poetry, and, as we have said before, it is not cheap sentimentality. It is the central pillar of his philosophy, which holds up the entire vault of his human integrity in the most difficult of times, his imprisonment.

One last contextualizing example is provided by that most idiosyncratic of modern Catholic poets, Hector de Saint-Denys Garneau. His sensitive nature exacerbated by the chronic illness that had him withdraw from school in Montréal at an early age and retreat to the lonely stretches of his parents’ estate in northern Québec, and a devotion to painting as well as poetry, led him to an introspective habit more frequently found in the Romantics of the nineteenth century, than in the Modernists of the twentieth. This, coupled with a strong Catholic upbringing and a serious approach to the faith developed in Garneau a sensitivity to the “hidden world beyond the veil” of this realm of appearances. It is this main thrust of his poetic perception that brings him close to the Gerard Manley Hopkins of the nature poems, in which a similar training in “instress” led the English Jesuit to an appreciation of the “grandeur of God” lying just beneath the crust of the quotidian world, ready to “shoot out” at moments of heightened perception “like shining from shook foil.” Consider for example the short poem “Les ormes” [“Elms”]:

Dans les champs  
 Calmes parasols  
 Sveltes, dans une tranquille élégance  
 Les ormes sont seuls ou par petites familles.  
 Les ormes calmes font de l’ombre  
 Pour les vaches et les chevaux  
 Qui les entourent à midi.  
 Ils ne parlent pas  
 Je ne les ai pas entendus chanter.  
 Ils sont simples  
 Ils font de l’ombre légère  
 Bonnement  
 Pour les bêtes.

[In the fields / calm parasols / svelte, with a tranquil elegance / the elms—  
alone, or in small families. / Calm elms making shade / for the cows and  
horses / that crowd around them at noon. / They don't speak / and I've  
never heard them sing. / They are simple. / They make the shade / tenderly,  
simply, / for the beasts.]

This presses on even farther than Hopkins, for here the personification proceeds to an expression of consciousness. The poem reads as if the elms were actually aware of their role in the world, and created that shade not haphazardly or as a physical matter of course, but willingly, sacrificially, for the good of the creatures they benefit. It is more than Hopkinsean, it is a Dantean moment. In this realization—supplemented with the warm image of the trees grouped in “families”—the poet/mystic understands in a flash that the world is indeed a sensible thing, the inscape of which is *benevolence*.

Garneau's sensitivity to the meaningful inscape of things leads to an expression of hyper-sensitivity to what Miłosz calls “the underside of the tapestry,” so that he seems, at times, to shift between the two planes of being surprisingly, unexpectedly. In the poem “Le jeu” [“Play”], he describes a child at play:

Ne me dérangez pas je suis profondément occupé

Un enfant est en train de bâtir un village  
C'est une ville, un comté  
Et qui sait  
    Tantôt l'univers.

Il joue

Ces cubes de bois sont des maisons qu'il déplace  
    et des châteaux  
Cette planche fait signe d'un toit qui penche  
    ça n'est pas mal à voir  
Ce n'est pas peu de savoir où va tourner la route  
    de cartes  
Cela pourrait changer complètement le cours de la rivière  
À cause du pont qui fait un si beau mirage dans  
    l'eau du tapis  
C'est facile d'avoir un grand arbre  
Et de mettre au-dessous une montagne  
    pour qu'il soit en haut.

(1-13)



[Don't bother me I am profoundly busy // A child is constructing a village / It's a city, a county / and who knows / soon the whole universe. // At play // these blocks of wood are houses that he moves and chateaux / this board is now a sloping roof and not a bad one, at that / and it's no little matter to know where the road of cards must turn / Such a thing might change the course of the river completely / because of the bridge whose image reflects so prettily in the carpet's waves. / No problem: to create a grand tree / and place a mountain beneath it to raise it high aloft.]

This is all very pretty. However, as Garneau's illness progressed, it took on a psychical, as well as a physical quality; an illness of the nerves that was only made worse by his continued isolation from his friends, and most other people.<sup>9</sup> In this state, his heightened awareness of the "underside of the tapestry" was a curse, rather than a blessing. In the poem "Le diable, pour ma damnation..." ["The devil, for my damnation ..."], he writes of the devil tempting him like a cruel stage manager, twitching at the curtain and tantalizing him with what lies beyond:

Le diable, pour ma damnation,  
 M'a laissé entrevoir la scène  
 Par l'ouverture des rideaux.  
 Il a, en se jouant de moi,  
 Soulevé le bord du voile  
 Qui cache la vie.  
 Oh ! pas longtemps !  
 Juste à peine ce qu'il faut  
 Pour me laisser appréhender  
 Ce qui est de l'autre côté  
 Et aiguïser, et mettre en branle  
 La curiosité,  
 Cette soif qui noya Ève, notre mère,  
 Dans le péché.  
 Juste à peine pour entrevoir  
 La fascination de la nuit,  
 La splendeur du jour éternel  
 L'étonnante réalité.

Juste à peine pour que j'entende  
 Le chœur des oiseaux et des fées  
 L'harmonie universelle  
 De ces couleurs et de ces chants.

.....  
 Et je reste là dans la salle,  
 Les yeux ouverts, les oreilles attentives,

Affamé, rongé d'attente,  
 À mesure que le désespoir grimpe en moi,  
 Séché de soif et de cette attention vers la commissure  
     des rideaux, me disant : « Est-ce le moment ?  
     voilà ! Les rideaux vont s'écarter. Je vais voir,  
     je vais entendre !  
 Je vais toucher des yeux la vie !  
 (1-27)

[The devil, for my damnation, / once let me peek upon the Stage / through a tiny curtain-slit. / Playing with me in this manner / he lifted up the veil's fringe / beyond which life is hidden. / Oh! Not for long! / Just for a bit, so that he might / allow me to apprehend / what's there on the other side, / and sharpen, and excite / that curiosity, / that thirst which drowned Eve, our mother, / in sin. / Just for a bit, to let me catch / the fascination of the night, / the splendor of the eternal day, / the stunning reality. // Just for a bit, to let me hear / the choirs of birds and fairies / the universal harmony / of these colors and songs. //...// And so I remain here in the house / eyes open wide, and ears attentive, / starved, consumed by waiting / in proportion as despair creeps up my sides, /pining with thirst and attention towards the part in the curtain, saying: "Will it be now? Look! The curtains are parting. I'm going to see, I'm going to hear! / I'm going to touch Life with my eyes!]

This is not a poem of despair; the narrator knows what the devil is doing: charming him with promises of finally catching a glimpse of the "real" life hidden behind the curtain of existence, but never intending, of course, to part those heavy folds. For all he wants is to keep the narrator entranced, fixed in this state of tantalization, immobile before the spectacle of life, and thus stationary, fixed in a moral paralysis which precludes the action necessary to participate in this life, and win the next.

In this poem, Garneau correctly identifies the reason why gnosticism, with its rejection of matter in favor of an over-exaggerated worship of spirit, can lead only to spiritual destruction. Christianity is a religion of the real; the world, while needing to be "overcome," can only be overcome by people living in the world, using good matter, created by a good God, in the manner it was intended to be used. As Eliot puts it in Chorus IX of *The Rock*:

The LORD who created must wish us to create  
 And employ our creation again in His service  
 Which is already His service in creating.  
 For Man is joined spirit and body,  
 And therefore must serve as spirit and body.

Visible and invisible, two worlds meet in Man;  
 Visible and invisible must meet in His Temple;  
 You must not deny the body.  
 (30-37)

This knowledge, however, was not enough to counteract the corrosive effect of Garneau's illness and isolation, which made of him an unwilling hermit in the Canadian wilds, persecuted by a shyness bordering on agoraphobia. And thus, while he never ceased longing for the blessings of marriage,<sup>10</sup> his extreme shyness pushed him to express erotic love in poems such as "Accueil" ["Reception"] as a bodiless phenomenon. Thus there is no touching in "Accueil," only looking. Sight is the only sense that can serve so weak an erotic attachment stretching between two beings so sublimated that one of them may not even be aware of the other's presence.

Moi ce n'est que pour vous aimer  
 Pour vous voir  
 Et pour aimer vous voir

Moi ça n'est pas pour vous parler  
 Ça n'est pas pour des échanges  
conversations

Ceci livré, cela retenu  
 Pour ces compromissions de nos dons

C'est pour savoir que vous êtes,  
 Pour aimer que vous soyez

Moi ce n'est que pour vous aimer  
 Que je vous accueille  
 Dans la vallée spacieuse de mon recueillement  
 Où vous marchez seule et sans moi  
 Libre complètement

Dieu sait que vous serez inattentive  
 Et de tous côtés au soleil  
 Et tout entière en votre fleur  
 Sans une hypocrisie  
 en votre jeu

Vous serez claire et seule  
 Comme une fleur sous le ciel  
 Sans un repli  
 Sans un recul de votre exquise pudeur

Moi je suis seul à mon tour  
 autour de la vallée  
 Je suis la colline attentive  
 Autour de la vallée  
 Où la gazelle de votre grâce évoluera  
 Dans la confiance et la clarté de l'air

Seul à mon tour j'aurai la joie  
 Devant moi  
 De vos gestes parfaits  
 Des attitudes parfaites  
 De votre solitude

Et Dieu sait que vous repartirez  
 Comme vous êtes venue  
 Et je ne vous reconnaitrai plus

Je ne serai peut-être pas plus seul  
 Mais la vallée sera déserte  
 Et qui me parlera de vous?

[For me it's only to love you / to see you / and to love the sight of you //  
 For me it's not to speak with you / It's not for exchanges conversations /  
 this thing given, that one retained / for the compromising of our gifts // It's  
 just to know that you are / to love the fact of your being // For me it's only  
 to love you / that I welcome you / in the spacious valley of my recollection  
 / where you walk along alone without me / completely free // God knows  
 that you'll be inattentive / and from all sides to the sun / and completely,  
 entirely in your blooming / without a single hypocrisy / in your game //  
 You'll be bright and alone / like a flower beneath the sky / without a fold /  
 without a recoiling of your exquisite modesty // Now me I'm alone in my  
 turn / about the valley / I'm the attentive hillock / where the gazelle of your  
 grace will evolve / in the confidence and clarity of the air // Alone in my  
 turn I'd have the joy / before me / of your perfect gestures / the perfect  
 attitudes / of your solitude // And God knows that you'll go away again /  
 just as you've come / and I'll never recognize you again // I won't be alone  
 perhaps / but the valley will be empty / and who will speak to me of you?]

How odd, that such an anti-corporeal verse should be composed in the full bloom of Modernism which—as Harold B. Segel puts it—displays an “extraordinary preoccupation [...] with physicality,” when Modernist thinkers “seriously questioned the epistemological authority of language [and felt] that the body, too, was language and, hence, semantically worthy.”<sup>11</sup> However, as we have suggested, Hector de Saint-Denys Garneau

is an atypical modern, and disharmony with the material world is a theme frequently encountered in his poetry.

Readers familiar with the more gloomy aspects of Garneau's verses of solitude and illness might be tempted to find a refreshingly lighthearted, almost cheery mood in the expressions of this last cited narrator. But at what cost? The effective motor of his newfound ability to "accept" another with ease is de-materialization; he becomes something of a guardian spirit. The burden of the body done away with, the embarrassment of the flesh lifted from his shoulders, he can now "approach" and "welcome" the beloved with confidence and something approaching joy. No, there is something pathologically wrong with the situation described in "Accueil," in which the loved one need not even be aware of the lover's presence. Passing by its disturbing voyeuristic qualities, the reader of the poem is right to wonder—Well, etherealization may have solved one of the narrator's problems, but can it draw him any closer to the community of others? His identification of the female subject with a gazelle, and his self-identification with the hills through which she wanders, has a gentle, Eastern poetic lilt to it, somewhat reminiscent of the Song of Songs. Yet can it not also be seen as a Freudian slip of sorts, indicative of the impossibility of the union of lover and beloved, as impossible as a union of two completely unrelated physical realities?

Gnosticism, spirit over matter—in what way is Garneau different from Miłosz? In this way, the very pathology of his state. Whereas in Miłosz, gnosticism is an integral part of his contradictory outlook on life, a comfortable rationalizing escape in times of frustration, or an intellectual plaything, for Garneau, it is a symptom of a real, spiritual (and perhaps psycho-somatic, or nervous) illness. It is an aberration; never accepted by the poet as part of his outlook, and the exception that proves the rule. Take, for example, this excerpt from his journal (unpublished until after his death), written in March of 1938:

*L'IMAGE DE LA TÊTE COUPEE, OU PLUTOT L'IMPRESSION.*

*À travers ma vie, l'impression que l'innocence était refoulée de plus en plus de bas en haut. Un désir en même temps de n'avoir rien à faire avec la partie corrompue, la partie sans lumière (correspondant à une lâcheté pratique en face de la conversion totale, de l'assainissement des parties corrompues par un refus complet de la complaisance). Ainsi, durant l'adolescence, une sorte de désir que mon corps finisse à la ceinture. N'avoir que la poitrine, elle pleine de lumière, sans le relent du sexe, l'appel d'en bas qui était une menace à cause de ma faiblesse excessive, lâcheté et complaisance. Jusqu'au moment où le coeur aussi perdit sa lumière, gagné aussi de corruption. Et alors la nausée devant tout l'être,*

*le désir d'en être détaché, d'être désengagé de cette pourriture, désir qui suggère l'image de la décollation, pour une résidence dans la tête et les yeux purs.*<sup>12</sup>

[THE IMAGE OF THE SEVERED HEAD, OR, RATHER, THE IMPRESSION

Throughout my life, the impression that innocence is retreating higher and higher, upwards. A desire, at the same time, to have nothing to do with the corrupted portion, the part devoid of light (corresponding to a practical cowardice in the face of total conversion, the healing of those corrupted parts by a complete refusal of complacency). Thus, during my adolescence, the desire that my body might end at the waist. To have nothing but the chest, and it full of light, without the mildew of sex, the base appeal which was a menace because of my excessive weakness, cowardice and complaisance. Up to the moment when my heart lost its light as well, overcome itself by corruption. And therefore the nausea in the face of all being, the desire to be detached, disengaged from this rot, a desire which suggests the image of decapitation, of a residence in the head alone with its pure eyes.]

It is enough to compare this fragment, intended for his eyes only, with any of the gnosticizing verses, essays or notes of Czesław Miłosz, intended for publication, to appreciate the difference between a Catholic person struggling with despair, and a humanist for whom Catholicism, indeed Christianity as a whole, is only one part of his intellectual makeup, and who, if he is not entirely sincere in his Manichean pronouncements, pronounces them anyway, *pour épater le bourgeois*.

For, finally, that is what Czesław Miłosz, the poet, seems to be, when one sets his work alongside that of poets firmly and consciously in the Christian tradition, like T.S. Eliot, Jan Zahradníček, and Hector de Saint-Denys Garneau. Are there Catholic themes in Miłosz's poetry? There certainly are. But these constantly jostle against, and, philosophically speaking, are negated by, anti-Christian themes, such as dualistic sentiments of Manichean or even Zoroastrian provenance, verses strongly redolent of heretical ideas such as determinism and the *apokatastasis* proposed by Origen, pantheism, syncretism and shamanism.

The subject of "inner orthodoxy" is an interesting one, and plays well into discussions of authorial intent, the critical interpretation of the poem in reference to, or divorced from, the biography of the poet, and the matter of who "owns" the poem once it is published. Is it the poet? Or the receptor? However, in any critical scheme of classical, close readings, the topic is simply inadmissible. The close reader of Miłosz's texts is completely indifferent to the poet's personal life, whether he actually

consulted shamans or was a daily communicant at Mass, whether he was faithful to his wife or a womanizer, whether he was, personally, a creationist or a believer in coincidental evolution. This is the critical approach we have striven to be faithful to throughout our discussion of religious themes in the poetry of Czesław Miłosz. His personality, as poet, narrator, or poet-narrator, is important to us only as the glue that binds these widely disparate collections of verse together.

But this leads us inexorably to what would be—save for this “escape clause” of inner orthodoxy—a statement that would be otherwise too obvious to make. All of the verses that came from the pen of Czesław Miłosz, over the seven-odd decades of his public life as a poet, communicating with his readers through the medium of print, are the expressions of one mind: that of Czesław Miłosz. For that reason, even though we have eschewed for the most part references to the poet’s biography, the poems are arranged in broadly chronological sequence, and seminal events in the poet’s life—the war and occupation, exile, the Nobel Prize—have been taken into account as defining milestones in that real person’s life that cannot but have had a contextual influence on the expressions of his pen.

One more thing about “inner orthodoxy” must be considered before we put that idea behind us. Is it at all tenable? Does it enhance the poet’s stature, or lessen it? Is it an aid to understanding his poetry, or a hindrance? I think that the answer must be: untenable, diminishing, and a hindrance. The striking thing about Miłosz’s claim to have opted to “speak the language” of his century, that this is the excuse for his expressing himself in the heavily non-Christian manner that we have seen recurring time and again in his poetry, is that, if such were the case, it was done for no other purpose than to be read.<sup>13</sup> He is not expressing manichean thoughts in his verse as a “hook” of some sort, to attract the reader’s eye, after which he will “slip in” his “inner,” orthodox convictions, taking the reader by surprise. No, he expresses manichean thoughts baldly, and leaves them at that. Just how absurd this particular theory of inner orthodoxy is, via which the poet would make his peace with the world, on the world’s terms, just to be heard by that world, yet heard expressing the world’s thoughts, not his own, for the development of literary culture is obvious. What would have been the result of St. Augustine adopting this attitude at the time of his writing of *The City of God*?

Czesław Miłosz may have been a Catholic, but Czesław Miłosz is not a Catholic poet. Poems of a true Christian spirit, especially those which call Christians to task for not living out the tenets of their faith, occur

throughout his poetry, inwoven with poems boldly decrying the justice of God, His omnipotence and even His goodness; poems castigating the insidiousness of totalitarian systems for their stifling control of the individual alternate with poems of such a deterministic cast as to describe man as a plaything of superior forces depriving him of his free will. Poems of compassion for the lonely, and poems that elevate Woman to an ideal, occur not far from rapacious verses in a predatory tone that equate the female body with a steak to be voraciously consumed. And, whereas we may suggest that the difficult trial of his exile, which cut him off from the Poland he loved, and his ensuing (real or exaggerated) isolation in California, may to some extent explain the violent turning inwards that led to a renewed interest in the inner life of secret knowledge that is the wellspring of gnosticism, biography is powerless to explain the continuance of the heterodox opinions expressed in the latter volumes of his poetry, published after the re-establishment of freedom in his homeland, and after his permanent return home. Nor can his admitted contradictory poetical and philosophical career explain that strange letter to John Paul II. It can, on the other hand, quite sufficiently explain the measured tones of the Pope's response to him.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Czesław Miłosz, "List półprywatny o poezji," in *Kontynenty* [*Continents*] (Kraków: Znak, 1999), pp. 75-90; p. 81.

<sup>2</sup> Miłosz, "List półprywatny..." p. 81.

<sup>3</sup> Fiut, *The Eternal Moment*, p. 137.

<sup>4</sup> T.S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society*, in *Christianity and Culture* (San Diego/New York/London: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1967 /this edition/), pp. 43-44.

<sup>5</sup> Although Harry confesses to pushing her overboard, it is never made apparent whether he murdered his wife or not. There are three possibilities: he has pushed her overboard, she has committed suicide, or it was an accident, as reported. The fact remains, however, that the woman is dead, and Harry feels an unendurable burden of guilt for: a) either murdering her in fact, and getting away with it, b) driving her to commit suicide, or c) wishing her death, and being faced with the horridness of seeing his ungodly desire fulfilled once the event has come to pass.

<sup>6</sup> If somewhat reluctantly. One of the themes of *La Saletta* is the consciousness of his responsibility to take voice, to join his voice with those of Melanie and Maximin, yet his fear to do so—which is finally overcome in the end.

<sup>7</sup> If we had the luxury of drawing out Zahradníček's thought at greater length, we would make note of the fact that the "passion" and death of the persecuted Czechs and Slovaks is devoid of salvific content, to the measure of their rejection, or ignorance, of Christ. In this poem, he speaks of countless "Calvaries without Christ" erected on all hillocks of Czechoslovakia by the communists. The only



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similarity between their deaths, and that of Christ, is their unmerited, unjust suffering. On the other hand, the similarity he draws here is directed not at the sufferers, but at the indifferent onlookers. The fact that they ignore these deaths, without protest, is a great sin of indifference, whether the sufferers are “worthy” their concern or not. Every man and woman is precious in God’s eyes, and it is not for us to judge otherwise, considering this person or that “expendable.” Indifference, in this case, is just as evil as participation in the torture.

<sup>8</sup> See “The Ecstasie,” line 7.

<sup>9</sup> It got so bad that he would not even attend Mass on Sunday, but only on the weekdays, when there would be practically no one in the church except for him and the priest.

<sup>10</sup> After a brief spell in which he considered whether or not he was called to the priesthood. *Ai-je la vocation du désert?* he asks in a journal note of January 30, 1938; *Ai-je la vocation de la pauvreté?* he reprises some eight months later on August 13 of the same year. See *Journal*, pp. 321, 371.

<sup>11</sup> Harold B. Segel, *Body Ascendant: Modernism and the Physical Imperative* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Garneau, *Journal*, pp. 336-337.

<sup>13</sup> Remember his words from *Nieobjęta ziemia*, in which he expressed an option for eschewing a more orthodox expression of his views as that would be associated with “lesser” verse. If that is the case, then, is he not setting up art over philosophy, popularity over truth?

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