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Czesław Miłosz and the Tradition of European Romanticism.

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Czesław Miłosz and the Tradition of European Romanticism

I.

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

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

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

At this point, I would like to put forward the following thesis: the difference between the “catastrophist” poetry of the young Miłosz and his poetical oeuvre starting from the sixties was not merely due to the discovery of T.S. Eliot and other Anglo-Saxon modernists. It was not less indebted (perhaps not in the sense of an overt poetical model, but rather as a point of reference) to an alternative romantic current, opposed to the hermetic line of Novalis and Nerval that was later adopted by the Symbolists. This alternative brand of Romanticism attempted to create a poetics that (as previously with Classicism) mirrored the metaphysical order of being. In other words: it proposed an integral interpretation of man’s *being-in-the-world* by creating an existential autobiography that went far beyond the somnambulist, “lunar” aspects of existence. The founding fathers of this Romantic line were – by definition – “major poets”. To our mind come immediately two names: Goethe (after overcoming his period of “*Sturm und Drang*”) and William Wordsworth. It is important, at this point, to stress that what I propose is an intertextual investigation from the point of view of a *general* typology of Romanticism, and not an attempt to unearth direct influences of the abovementioned poets on Miłosz. I use their poetics rather as a heuristic category, in order to specify the existential structure by which the later poetry of Poland’s greatest twentieth century poet has been shaped. From the point of view of intertextuality, in a narrower sense, this structure is mainly (but not exclusively) dependent on the particular circumstances of the Polish literary tradition (Adam Mickiewicz, the author of *Pan Tadeusz*, as the chief Polish exponent of non-hermetic Romanticism). What I – from the point of view of a general typology – essentially assert is that the underlying poetical structure through which these major Romantic poets express a specific totality of (self)-experience¹ recalls the structure of Miłosz’s mature poetry, particularly with regard to the relationship between the authorial instance (speaker) and the voices on the level of the represented world. This similarity is to a certain extent obscured by the fact that Miłosz employs poetical devices typical for the modernist (long) poem, e.g. the technique of *collage*.

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

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

the poem “Slow River” („Powolna rzeka”) the identity of the speaker is unclear². An attentive reading of other poems written during these years shows that it is in fact the second person singular that makes its presence emphatically felt. Furthermore, we are faced both with the first person singular (often implicitly marked) and the first person plural. A more profound analysis usually shows that the second person is either an *alter ego* of the “I” (as has been pointed out by Michał Głowiński in his interpretation of the poem “Roki”³), or the (often rather roughly treated) addressee of the rhetorical stance adopted by a socially committed poet (c.f. the second part of the *Poem about Frozen Time* (*Poemat o czasie zastygłym*)). It is not easy to work out clear-cut distinctions, but it could be generally maintained that the first person plural attempts to define its place towards époques and civilizations. The “I,” on the other hand, describes itself by gradually emerging from the multi-voiced pressure of something that does away with ordinary historical time and that, because of its demonic or atavistic shape, cannot be conceived of as belonging to the realm of civilization. To put it succinctly, the “I” describes itself by facing an *energy*. An excellent example of such a form of selfhood is the poetical subject in the poem “Hymn”: “There is no-one between you and me,/ and to me strength is given” (13).⁴ (♀).

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

² J. Błoński, *Miłosz jak świat*, Kraków 1989, p. 18.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁹ “ten nowy ład form odrodzonych, wyrażających chęć i prawdę” [W t. 1, p. 122]

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

2.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.

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

¹⁰ Błoński, *Miłosz jak świat*, p. 59.

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

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

The modernist mediatization explains why Miłosz started to take interest in larger poetical forms. However, it soon became clear that the Eliotian genres, particularly the type of a polyphonic long poem represented by *The Waste Land* and the cyclical set of variations linking metaphysical meditation to musical structures (*Four Quartets*), failed to satisfy a self that, participating in history, attempted to find its unique and unrepeatable destiny by multiplying perspectives in accordance with the inner metamorphoses it had undergone. In *The Waste Land* the “I” (Tiresias) merely registers events and moods to which it passively surrenders. The poetical subject of *Four Quartets* assesses everything from an ideal point of view, beyond space and time¹². We have already seen that during his catastrophist period Miłosz

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

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

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

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

anger... Nor did Broniewski win their admiration" (120).¹³ This "didactic" perspective begins to change in the third part – "The Spirit of History" – that, even though grammatical indicators of personality rarely occur, appears to be with regard to expressions of despondency and anger much more permeated by personality than the parts about the *Belle Époque* and the two decennia between the two world wars. The first person plural ("we") gradually transforms itself into the third person plural ("they"): "The survivors ran through fields, escaping/ From themselves (...) Till the end of their days all of them/ Carried the memory of their cowardice,/ For they didn't want to die without a reason" (132).¹⁴ The speaker once was one of them, but at the moment he has acquired a certain distance that is emphatically presented by the tension between the first and third person plural¹⁵.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4.

It could be argued that the *Treatise on Poetry*, notwithstanding its artistic importance, is a masterpiece that does not resolve all inner tensions. Nevertheless, the poem is an important link in Miłosz’s project of working out a “more comprehensive form” (a circumstance that, from an existential perspective, would appear to justify its being flawed). Furthermore, it is obvious that not the poetics of the poetical treatise shaping the first two parts of the poem, but the shift of perspective to an existential autobiography in its last (fourth) part were decisive for the evolution of Miłosz’s poetry. Its basis is the creative energy of memory, due to which time loses its opacity and reveals a specific architecture. Past and present intertwine through the act of representing the individual and distinct experiences of the self, often by means of, at first sight trivial, anecdotes. Miłosz’s adopting of anecdotes as a constructive principle in his later poetry recalls a similar tendency in the type of Romanticism of which Wordsworth was the acknowledged master, and that derived from the same concept of time as a function of the creative power of memory. The poem on the “growth of a poet’s mind” focuses (here I paraphrase the remarks of Thomas Vogler in his book *Preludes to a Vision*) not only on the remembered objects and scenes from nature in itself, but also aims to represent the way of remembering and experiencing those objects and scenes as features of certain general, or at least more comprehensive patterns that connect image with image, scene with scene²¹.

¹⁸ “W czasach dziwnych i wrogich żyliśmy [...]” [W t. 1, p. 79].

¹⁹ “ten ślub w Bazylei./ Dotknięta struna wioli i owoce/ W misach ze srebra” [W t. 2, p. 235].

²⁰ “Płuśnięcie bobra w noc amerykańską/ I pamięć większa niż jest moje życie” [W t. 2, p. 236].

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²⁷ "Potem pili, wrzeszczeli, kobiety poczynały" [W t. 2, p. 304].

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

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

5.

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

²⁹ J. Błoński, *Miłosz jak świat*, p. 101.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

³⁶ „Następnie obudziło mnie świecące w oczy słońce/ oparte na przelęczypo stronie Nevady” [W t. 2, p. 317].

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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