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Four poetics: Miłosz and literary movements.

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Four poetics: Miłosz and literary movements

The place of the poet, the task of literature

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

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

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

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

Four poetics.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<http://rcin.org.pl> (BL, box 4 (l. 60) — emphasis R. N.)

Czesław Miłosz and the Polish School of Poetry

Summarizing this period of his writing, he notes elsewhere:

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

(BL, box 8 (1955))

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

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

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

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

(1987 121)

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

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

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

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

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

Czesław Miłosz and the Polish School of Poetry

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

(2006 79 – emphasis R. N.)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nycz Four poetics: Miłosz and literary movements

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

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

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

(2003 569)

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

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

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

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

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

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

I don’t want to go too far in my divagations. But if Lyotard⁵ was right, if only that which is human can attempt to think that which is inhuman (and see in it its own beginning and end), in other word, if it is man’s peculiar property to be inhabited by – and to live surrounded by that which is inhuman, then a sufficient task for poetry (and a most difficult one) is not to make permanent, build, or interpret, not even to present (as these are all secondary or illusory tasks), but to point to the “inhuman” aspects of being on the most primary level of existential testimony. Consequently, Miłosz’s “expedition into the inhuman” is no longer a reformulated passion for “tracing” unattainable reality with the help of traditional or modern ways of poetics cognition. It is a way of discovering that poetry itself can be the “trace,” an “ostensive definition” of reality.

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

(2003 595)

A short conclusion

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

⁴ Ch. S. Peirce. *Wybór pism semiotycznych*, wybór H. Buczyńska-Garewicz, Warszawa 1997. 108

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

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

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

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

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