

Teksty Drugie 2012, 1, s. 96-105
Special Issue – English Edition



Ethical and Metaphysical Testimony in the Poetry of Zbigniew Herbert and Czesław Miłosz.

Bogdana Carpenter

Przeł. Anna Warso

Bogdana CARPENTER

Ethical and Metaphysical Testimony in the Poetry of Zbigniew Herbert and Czesław Miłosz¹

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

you were saved not in order to live
you have little time you must give testimony³

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

¹ Presented at "La place du témoignage dans la littérature polonaise du XXe siècle." Paris, 2 April 2003.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Czesław Miłosz and the Polish School of Poetry

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

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

(9)

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

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

...

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

(6)

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

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

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

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

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

(404)

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

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

Czesław Miłosz and the Polish School of Poetry

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

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

(416)

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

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

a specter is haunting
the map of history
the specter of indeterminacy

(404)

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

*

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

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

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

Further, in the academic year 1980/81 Miłosz also delivered a series of lecture at Harvard University, poignantly titled *The Witness of Poetry*, admitting that with other poets from Eastern Europe, he sought to find in poetry “witness and a participant in one of mankind’s major transformations” (4). Miłosz is aware that “posterity will read us in an attempt to comprehend what the twentieth century was like” (11). He devotes one of the lectures, “Ruins and Poetry,” to poets who gave testimony to their era and the experience of war in particular – a collective experience for Polish society as a whole – not only sympathizing, but actually identifying with those poets. Until the mid-80s, English and American criticism tended to read his work mostly through a political and historical lens, reducing it – wrongly and unjustly – to witness literature⁶ and Miłosz himself claims testimony to be a constitutive part of a literary fact, and literature – as it transcends the message delivered by the press and television – a “more reliable witness than journalism” (16).

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

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

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

⁷ *Eseje*. Warszawa. 2000. 121-126.

Czesław Miłosz and the Polish School of Poetry

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

(581)

History fades away, only “the sumptuous, golden verse” lasts.⁸

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

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

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

(343)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹¹ Miłosz, Czesław. “Introduction.” *Haiku*. Wydawnictwo M: Kraków. 1992.

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹² M. Zaleski *Formy pamięci*. Warsaw, 1996. 28-31.

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

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

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

Translation: Anna Warso

¹⁴ In: *Polish Postwar Poetry*. Berkeley, 1983. 121.