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**POETRY AS CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ'S  
PERSONAL IDENTITY**

Leszek Kołakowski used to say that the specific aspect of being a philosopher is that it is one of his duties to reflect on the very nature of this job. A tailor might be a tailor without thinking about the essence of being a tailor—by simply sewing clothes, while a philosopher cannot do his job without asking himself this question: what is philosophy? History tells us that philosophers are not the only people who ask themselves questions about what exactly they do. This happens also to poets, although not to all poets and not in all periods. When we are dealing with the *oeuvre* of Czesław Miłosz, we come across this issue all the time: what is poetry? Who am I, the one who writes poetry? Writing poetry was for him organically connected with self-knowledge, with thinking about the sense of writing poetry.

What I would like to present here is not a result of some deep research, but merely a project, although—in my opinion—it is worthy of extension. Miłosz—similarly to Romantic poets—took his poetic vocation very seriously. For him it was not only a problem of poetic craftsmanship or participation in some literary culture. It was the problem of metaphysical foundations and even of individual identity. A person who writes poetry enters into relationships with the world—or, in other words, with the being—and this is both in the sense of the essence of the world and of existence, but also the essence of language, human ability to reach reality through language. For him poetry is grounded in ontology and has epistemological—cognitive—goals. Which does not mean that a poet must have his/her own philosophical system. However, in his/her

output we can find a more or less conscious picture of his/her vision of the world. It happens often that it is up to readers or interpreters to dig this vision out; sometimes a poet gives this vision on their own, or even writes about it in poetry or prose. This is connected with the very high estimation of poetry among all human occupations, about its gift to reach for the heart of the matter and put man face to face with what is most important in their existence. Therefore, if we want to read poetry in a meaningful way, we should have some idea of what poetry is, what are its capabilities and its limitations.

Miłosz had such reflections from the beginning, or at least from the time of his proper debut with the volume *Trzy zimy* (*Three Winters*). Particularly in the poems “Ptaki” (“Birds”), “Hymn” (“Hymn”), “O młodszym bracie” (“Of Younger Brother”), and “Powolna rzeka” (“Slow River”). After World War II he dealt with this theme in *Traktat poetycki* (*A Treatise on Poetry*) and in his poems. This theme was also present in his essays from the collections: *Prywatne obowiązki* (*Private Duties*) and *Ogród nauk* (*The Garden of Science*), before it was strongly orchestrated in *Ziemia Ulro* (*The Land of Ulro*), a book about poetry as a force capable of salvation and about the dangers awaiting it. And although he was to be separated from Josif Brodski by the religious cult of beauty of the younger poet, both friends, a Pole and a Russian, thinking and creative observers of the twentieth century, were connected by the role they ascribed to poetry: as the peak of creative aspirations and capabilities. One would like to say that while in the case of Brodski his poetic sources are closer as they come from Acmeism, the sources of Miłosz are more distant. Polish Romanticism, towards which Miłosz was ambivalent, gave him, willy nilly, this way of looking at poets’ and poetry’s goals, where the return to the Platonic definition of poets’ vocation could be traced. What is significant is that both Miłosz and Brodski were at the same time able to refer to the past and take part in their own period, in the ‘Modernity’ of their understanding.

An artist defines himself/herself best when he/she draws circles of his/her likes and dislikes, pointing to poles between which he/she moves. We know quite a lot about Miłosz’s likes and about his masters.

He devoted almost a whole book to them, *The Land of Ulro*, a book which was to defend forgotten themes of the European imagination—forgotten as a seemingly dead branch of culture. Rational civilization (its terms of thinking were prepared by Medieval scholastics) plunged into darkness external visions of minds hovering in spaces which cannot be checked or touched, where the dominant role is given to visions, symbols, the rules of analogy, and where a different sort of knowledge is preserved, a different experience of the world. Miłosz spoke up for poets, visionaries, theologians-philosophers; for the people who in language built a bridge leading to issues which are unapproachable by reason, but which are nevertheless necessary, which are foundations of spiritual balance, foundations for hope in a world more and more dominated by sciences and technologies. According to Miłosz (at least at the time when he was writing *The Land of Ulro*), in such a civilization traditional religions are not enough to protect people from the feeling of alienation, and therefore it is worth turning to another, hidden current of wisdom, included in the words of sages and poets.

We also know a bit about Miłosz's dislikes. They were always meaningful, expressed equally bravely and lively, as was the admiration he had for his masters who inspired him. This put Miłosz opposite those phenomena in culture which refer to the contemporary experience of chaos and disorientation, fear of the world constructed in front of us by men, and to the loss of illusions on the theme of any sensible way to live. For Miłosz contemporary poetry is defined by two phenomena, which are for him objects of critique and protest—in the name of one's own desire for sense, in the name of moral salvation. I will call them a pole of pure beauty and a pole of despair.

We know that Miłosz was particularly reluctant towards Stephan Mallarmé, a poet even today regarded as a patron of contemporary poetry, which is felt particularly strongly in France. Mallarmé was connected with the concept of pure poetry, unblemished by contact with reality; poetry, the pride of which is based on independent language, cut off from the world. The slogan 'To Purify the Words of the Tribe' means a quite bold project to dramatically change

the definition of traditional poetry. It is not to touch, to teach, to save, to serve any causes external to it. It is to remain aloof and lonely, concerned with looking for unusual connotations between words, to create out of them independent things, endowed with the glow of precious stones. Things vibrant, exquisite, mysterious, like this rose which was “absent from all bouquets”. It is not a flower which is an object of interest, it is not its symbolic function, but being which is purely linguistic, unverifiable. Poems are gems full of glare, capable of causing a state of mental exultation in well versed readers, a state of metaphysical suspension, where this reader is exposed to ideas without referents and enjoys pure products of the human brain. This was the source not only for ‘linguistic poetry’, but also the conviction that culture is a hole locked within itself, with an unlimited number of variants, constructs equally inventive and empty, that is unattainable in an way to material and spiritual reality. The sole intellectual valour of this construct is hedonistic: pleasure being a result of a more and more intricate order of words, their unusual musicality, new stimuli to the sense of beauty. A poem is a construct as if made by a jeweller, which is given to people educated and sublime, disappointed with the vulgarity of everyday life.

Nothing was more alien to Miłosz than the temptation of poet-jewellers, eulogists of pure beauty. Miłosz’s writings were grounded in the creative status of man: a psycho-physical being inhabiting the earth, using all sense to learn about surrounding reality. Miłosz’s man is submerged in geography and history; he sees himself as a ‘builder’ and attempts to reach a pan-historic dimension, where the sense of earthly peregrinations is preserved. In other words, the metaphysics of his poetry is consciously traditional, derivable from Plato and particularly from Christianity. A transcendental dimension of poetic creation is related both to human hope and to language, meanings of which are constituted through reference to some guarantee of sense, while trying to transcend the passing world. On the other hand, Miłosz’s poems may be called a great eulogy of senses; a poet is greedy for everything which appeals to senses—seeing, tasting, biting, touching, smelling, listening. Sensuality is

connected with cognitive joy, knowledge about our reality which has human proportions. The linguistic puzzles of jewellers would testify to some betrayal, would go against the dignity of human language and poetic vocation.

The other pole of Miłosz's idiosyncrasy is an attitude which, for the lack of a better term, I will call twentieth century nihilism. In *The Land of Ulro* it is represented by Samuel Beckett and Witold Gombrowicz; in many of Miłosz's poems we have poets whose poems are like groans, moans and yells coming out of the psychiatric wards of hospitals. The performance of *En attendant Godot* in Paris in the 1950s was, for Miłosz, an experience full of meaning: it showed an attitude of educated spectators towards a moving spectacle of man's disintegration and negation of his most important aspirations. To live means to be subjected to decay, to give up any hope. Miłosz always wrote against such 'philosophy', also during his own 'catastrophic' phase, when historical and metaphysical apocalypse, despite destruction, left, after all, hope for a spiritual transformation. *The Land of Ulro* and many poems contain a testimony: Miłosz, in all his writings, challenged contemporary nihilism (perhaps it is better to call it 'radical atheism?'). In his strategy poetry is the best weapon or tool, a missionary of unfaltering faith, rebuilding the world reduced by pessimists to a heap of rubble. It could be called *capax hominis*—if the phrase *capax Dei* were to be considered too conceited. Miłosz was convinced that it was an indispensable material for the theologians of today and tomorrow, forced to face reality and redefine old ideas—if Christianity is to remain alive in the world of changing values and history turned upside down.

With such a lofty definition of poetry, this question becomes particularly poignant: who is a poet going to be, in what way is the voice of a poet to be distinguished from this vastness of the written world we call literature? And here we come to the heart of the matter of identity. Miłosz always defined himself as a poet, and he strongly stressed his dislike of prose, of literary fiction. He considered a good novel to be an extremely rare phenomenon, a novel which shows the whole complexity of man; which formulates, in its own way, philosophical

questions. It would be interesting to trace this identification with poetic vocation in the chronology of Miłosz's works, its changes in different periods of his life. A dramatic moment of threat came in 1951, when he decided to live in exile, it was then that he doubted (fortunately not for long) the possibility of writing poems outside his vernacular language, in total isolation from live readers. Then he wrote about 'suicide'—maybe he predicted his own loss of the power of words and moral schizophrenia, resulting from the conviction that he was now 'nowhere', away from readers in Poland and at the same time away from the cultural West, which was then showing strong communist leanings. We know that he overcame this trap.

The next crisis was connected with his stay in the U.S.A. and was particularly acute in the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s. He was then living on the continent, the society, history and nature of which are so different from Europe, with its small size and weight of history; this caused alienation and strengthened loneliness, which had been with him for a long time. In his letters he described it as an existential and metaphysical crisis; a type of alienation which could not be overcome because it was strengthened by his social functions there. He was a scholar there, a university professor. If his name had been known then to anyone, it was the name of an author of political essays, revealing the nature of the communist system introduced by Russians in countries in central and eastern Europe. Czesław Miłosz as a political scientist! Let us imagine his internal disagreement towards such an attitude to his work; anger and helplessness at such treatment of him, the sense of lack of understanding and justice. After all, he had to offer something different, something more important; after all he felt bound by the poetic pact he had established in his early youth, the pact which had been strengthened with every volume of poetry.

In letters exchanged with Konstanty Jeleński between 1953 and Jeleński's death in 1987 (recently published) we find the description of this drama from the most personal perspective. Miłosz despaired. He wrote about the lack of possibility to preserve his integrity in such conditions. A reader who is familiar with Miłosz's American poems

which were written during this period might be really surprised. Miłosz then lived in circumstances most suitable for himself and his family. He travelled across this new and fascinating country, he wrote short and long poems, his name started to stand out more and more in the context of Polish poetry and translations of his works. And at the same time his letters to a close friend were often full of despair, the source of which is not clear to us. Miłosz seemed disoriented, lost the sense of life and asked an unusual question: "But, dear Kot [diminutive of Konstanty], who am I for you?"

Now, we should recall some details about Konstanty Jeleński; his essays, features of character, his special role in commenting on Miłosz's (and not only Miłosz's) writings, in calming Miłosz down and supporting him. It must suffice when I state that it was a kind of psychotherapy through the exchange of letters, in which Kot turned out to be selfless and helpful. For Miłosz Jeleński's role was fundamental—he regarded Jeleński as an unusual reader, and as he wrote: as his only reader. Nobody could understand his poems so well—in all their complexity, in all layers, historical, social, personal; in their intellectual content and in the strength of pictures built with words. Jeleński was an ideal reader, intuitive, discerning; who had, on the one hand, knowledge of Poland before World War II (shared with Miłosz), and on the other multi-dimensional and multi-linguistic culture; knowledge not only of literature but also of painting, philosophy, contemporary sciences. He was a reader with a wide perspective, a holistic approach and a possibility to identify poetic details, in which, as if in a lens, both experience and imagination are focused. And Miłosz asked him this desperate question: "But, dear Kot, who am I for you?" One may ponder these words for a long time, may ponder a poet with his psyche, who needs acceptance from without, acceptance of others. One might ponder about an artist, who in a creative process, presupposes a reader, because poetry, painting, music are tested only when they reach others: readers, spectators, viewers. One might ponder about the power of artistic expression which cannot survive if it does not reach the other, even if in some indefinite future, and in the present this artist needs to see himself

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in the other's eyes. Because of the fear of creative paralysis and a distortion of the sense of his actions. Miłosz had to see himself in the eyes of an 'ideal' reader, who not only sent him back his picture as a poet, but who would react with gratitude to sent or published poems; a reader who could tell about his ways of reading of these poems. Could we think of a better affirmation for a poet?... A poet entangled in human affairs, but who was at the same time was aware that he came to people with a fragile gift, the value of which is tested only in the act of acceptance.