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**A FOX IN THE LAND OF ULRO:
MIŁOSZ AND BECKETT**

When, two years ago, Antoni Libera published his book *Godot i jego cień* (*Godot and his Shadow*), it was reviewed by Wanda Zwinogrodzka, who entitled her review “Na ziemi Ulro” (“On the Land of Ulro”). I was surprised by this title. So much time had passed since my last reading of *The Land of Ulro* (written in 1977), and I must admit that I did not remember Miłosz’s polemics with Samuel Beckett present in this essay. And yet, we used to read *The Land of Ulro* over and over again; it was an iconic text for my generation. With his autobiographical book Libera renewed Beckett’s presence in contemporary Polish culture (Beckett’s plays translated by Libera into Polish are performed extremely rarely these days), while Zwinogrodzka—with the very title of her review—recalled the dispute Miłosz had had with Beckett ever since the 1950s till his death. As late as in the 1990s Miłosz wrote to Krzysztof Myszkowski, the editor of *Kwartalnik Artystyczny*: “I appreciate Beckett a lot and I feel him inside me strongly enough to defend him wholeheartedly.”

The polemics with Beckett appears at the very end of *The Land of Ulro*, and it was the point of arrival for Miłosz—the last stone in the mosaic of his essay. As we have just heard, it was not a stone placed there accidentally. While debating with Beckett, Miłosz was, to a certain extent, fighting with himself. It is like a fight with one’s one shadow—to make another connection with Libera’s book—a hopeless fight, but fought consciously and till the end; therefore heroic. However, Miłosz preferred not to talk about heroism, but about cunning and slyness. In his fight with Beckett—or more precisely with Beckett’s

vision of man and the world—he preferred to be like Odysseus, not like Hector. But really, he wanted to be a fox. Miłosz wrote in *The Land of Ulro* “[Beckett] wishes to tease us with the obvious; he is like the man who sidles up to a hunchback and begins to needle him. ‘Hunchback, you are a hunchback; you’d rather not be reminded of it, but I shall see to it that you are reminded’. As for me, I know I am a hunchback; I make no pretence to the contrary [...] I know full well the poverty of human existence. Yes, there were times when I felt like howling, ramming my head against the wall, but from sheer exertion of will, from sheer necessity, I buckled down and went to work. Then along comes this man, boasting to me of his ‘discovery’, and I say there is something not quite right about it. The hound teaching the fox how to hunt, while I, the fox, have been using my cunning and trickery to kill the painful awareness in myself.”¹

Miłosz’s mosaic is constructed out of many various elements: biographical reminiscences and summaries of the ways of thinking of three visionaries and poets: Swedenborg, Blake and Oskar Władysław Miłosz; we have fragments devoted to Adam Mickiewicz with a metaphysical interpretation of *Pan Tadeusz* (*Sir Thaddeus*) as a poem about order in the world, we have musings on Dostoyevsky and Gombrowicz, and a dispute on the present and the future of poetry. And all this written in a simple, communicative way, using the colloquial language akin to the language of *gawęda* (skaz). “*The Land of Ulro* was the result of the pure wish of the writer to be in contact with his readers,” wrote Barbara Koc in a paper devoted to Miłosz’s essay, and she was right. In the very form of this prose: light, clear, which “would let us understand each other without exposing the author or reader to sublime agonies” (“*Ars Poetica?*»),² there are located the first elements of the polemics with Beckett.

¹ Czesław Miłosz, *The Land of Ulro*, transl. by Louis Iribarne, Carcanet, Manchester, 1981, 243.

² Czesław Miłosz, *Wiersze wybrane/Selected Poems*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 1996, 197.

After all, Beckett was a representative of avant garde literature of the middle of the twentieth century, which in the hermetic form of individual works pointed to the crisis of language; language which got removed from reality with a consequent crisis of man's consciousness resulting from the loss of a tool of cognition and communication. This crisis was most clearly seen in the plays of such writers as Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco in the West, or Tadeusz Różewicz and Helmut Kajzar in Poland. Miłosz did not ignore these issues, but he regarded them as tragic features of his times and tried to oppose them with all his strength. After all, he was a poet who believed in the possibility of explaining himself and the world, and in the possibility of agreement with others. He was a poet-translator in all senses of the word. Therefore, in his writings there appeared various poets, writers, philosophers, ancient and new, of the West and the East, whom Miłosz literally translated, but to whom he also created access, with whom he conversed as if they were his contemporaries, and he invited us to these conversations. The key formula of his writing was dialogue, sometimes polemic, but even then based on the conviction that we share a system of ideas within which we can locate our own positions. This is unusual in the period of parallel discourses—of a cultural poli-monologue. Therefore, Miłosz's polemics with Gombrowicz or with Różewicz are so important to us—they show differences in a world which for Miłosz has remained a unity. And so has language, although it 'serves' many different world views, and although it has become more abstract because of science and more vulgar because of mass media, it has not been separated from experiences common to us all, and may serve as a tool of communication.

One of the people with whom Miłosz entered into a dialogue is Beckett, "the most honest"—these words were used by Miłosz—representative of the contemporary Western civilization, which Miłosz called "the land of Ulro". Because Miłosz wanted to lead us away from this land, he made Beckett his antagonist. They never met, although they could have met since they walked the streets of the same city. "The Paris premiere of *En attendant Godot* was held

in Théâtre Babylone in January 1953. Soon after, Miłosz watched this performance, observing that the audience roared with laughter, and stating that despair given in the form of clowning led to indifference, while Beckett's protagonists are persons totally devoid of free will"—wrote Andrzej Franaszek in his biography of Miłosz. Texts sent to Miłosz to the BBC in London show that Miłosz was following Beckett's career, and that he saw *Endgame*, *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Happy Days*. And it was to *Endgame* that he would return many years later in the final part of *The Land of Ulro*.

Miłosz used two lines from William Blake as a motto for his essay: "They rage like wild beasts in the forests of affliction/In the dreams of Ulro they repent of their human kindness." As is the case with Blake, Ulro was for Miłosz a spiritual state, the shape of which is metaphorically expressed through a picture of a decaying land. Its inhabitants are people spiritually handicapped—people who are not complete. Blake, who lived at the turn of the nineteenth century, placed the following people in this land: scientists (or natural philosophers as they were called then), Bacon, Locke, Newton, intellectuals, artists—who made science the most important, and eventually the only, tool of cognition of the world. What is the source of this handicap? Miłosz explained it in this way: "In Blake's text four mythic figures create a family in man, the quarrel of which led to a catastrophe. These figures represent the Body with its five senses, the creative Imagination of individuals, Emotions (love and hate) and Reason. The destruction of harmony, the quarrel within the family, is the result of the dominance of Reason, which fell because of its pride and got separated from the rest of the family. Urizen, or Reason, fell through pride and broke away from Tharmas, Luvah and Urthona, leaving him incorporeal, passionless and, most significantly, barred from all workings of the Imagination: the subconscious."³ The dominance of reason in the human world—and what is at stake here is not only cognition but also actions, the construction of the collective consciousness, the architecture of the imagination,

³ Ibid., 168.

the organization of life, that is politics—means the dominance of rationalism. Rationalism was the foundation for the scientific world view, which undermined and then excluded all other forms of learning about the world, experiencing and organizing it: mythical and religious.

When we associate Locke and Newton with the 'scientific world view' we have an impression of anachronism—after all, we are living in a very different world. But in the fragment devoted to Beckett, Miłosz did not refer to the natural philosophers of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, but their contemporary successors. He dealt with Jacque Monod, a French geneticist, whose theories were for Miłosz an example of the scientific radicalism of our times. Monod wrote a book entitled *Chance and Necessity*, which was published in English in 1971. Monod's essay was concerned with the philosophy of biology, and resulted in a heated scientific as well as philosophical-political debate. Monod was interested in relations between the features of live organisms which were known on the basis of the first molecular research and the evolution of these organisms, and the whole universe. The analysis of micro-organisms was for him a point of departure to construct a scientific vision of the whole universe. What is most important, however, is that Monod considered the influence of scientific research on ethical and political concepts. Contemporary genetic experiments are, in a sense, the fulfilment of his hypotheses about the possibilities of creating new organisms, and of the need to change law(s) as a result of it. Monod was, as mentioned, a radical scientist who was prepared to sacrifice rules defining human life in its spiritual, philosophical and ethical dimensions, for the truth discovered by scientists. Scientific discoveries were turning these rules into rubble, on which Monod—similarly to other scientists of his period—wanted to build a new order and, as Miłosz stated: "the literary representative of this scientific rationalism is Beckett."⁴

"The world (the Earth, Cosmos, the Being) undergoes destruction and degradation in the same way in which living creatures are destroyed

⁴ Ibid., 241.

and degraded,” wrote Antoni Libera in his commentary to *Endgame*. And his words are very similar to Monod’s arguments. “This process is both gradual and saccadic. The decay accumulates and then we have collapse. During the presented event we deal with something which is more ‘evolutionary’ than ‘revolutionary’. In the past, however, in the relatively recent past, a cataclysm occurred, a type of fundamental destruction of an old order. Because the *present* world is clearly after a catastrophe. [Emphasis A.L]. Although this is not stated directly, a lot of references and signs indicated that protagonists locked in *the shelter* are, maybe, the last creatures on Earth [..] ‘Outside of here it’s death,’ says Hamm at the very beginning.”

In *The Land of Ulro* Miłosz explained the nature of the catastrophe presented by Beckett in the following way:

Beckett, like his literary contemporaries in the West, despite what has been said about its decline, proclaimed *urbi at orbi*, which in the nineteenth century was known only to a handful, and which was the message of Nietzsche’s invective directed at the Europeans: So you killed God, and then you can get away with it? Now, on a mass scale, was born the realization of man’s new metaphysical condition, summarized by a single word: *NO*. No voice reaching from the cosmos, no good and evil, no fulfilment of the promise, no Kingdom. But that was not all, The individual, proudly pointing at himself as “I”, proved as much an illusion, a bundle of reflexes covered by a uniform epidermis. Love was an illusion, friendship an illusion, because both were premised on the possibility of communication, and how can we communicate when language is reduced to a babble bespeaking the solitariness of each? Only time, absolute time, rushing nowhere out of nowhere; time measured by the gradual deterioration of organic cells.⁵

The world constructed by science appears to be like a land of unlimited possibilities, moving its borders further and further away—after all we go deep into an atom and explore outer space—and becoming more and more affluent. But the other side of this world

⁵ Ibid., 240-241.

is a desert, a world in which it is the being which was degraded, the world-phantom, a big NOTHING, which Beckett showed on stage. It is easy to believe in it when we remember the destruction of World War II. Europe was rebuilt, but the void remained, as Miłosz experienced himself in Paris. This city, in the early 1950s, was as unreal to his as Eliot's London from *The Waste Land* was unreal. Beckett made this void real in the theatre.

Miłosz wrote a few very important poems, the theme of which was the degradation of the being itself, and I can imagine that when Clov in *Endgame* assembles his telescope and looks through a small window into the world beyond the shelter, he sees the same reality which Miłosz depicted in the poem "Economia Divina" (1973):

Roads on concrete pillars, cities of glass and cast iron,
Airfields larger than tribal dominions
Suddenly ran short of their essence and disintegrated.⁶

Clov also looks through the other window, located opposite. He could have seen through it what Miłosz had seen in the poem "Po drugiej stronie" («On the Other Side»)

[...] Wooden shacks,
A lame tenement house in the field of weeds.
Potato patches fenced in with barbed wire.
They played as-if-cards, I smelled as-if-cabbage,
There was as-if-vodka, as-if-dirt, as-if-time.
I said: "See here..." but they shrugged their
Shoulders,
Or averted their eyes. This land new nothing of Surprise.
Nor of flowers. Dry geraniums in tin cans,
A deception of greenery coated with sticky dust.
Nor of the future. Gramophones played.
Repeating endlessly things which have never been.⁷

⁶ Ibid., 225.

⁷ Czesław Miłosz, *The Collected Poems 1931-1987*, Viking, London, 1989, 169. The poem "On the Other Side" was translated by Jan Darowski.

While writing this poem Miłosz was inspired by the picture of hell described by Emanuel Swedenborg. In the poem “Przedmieście” (“Outskirts”) this hell looked like this:

Farther on, the city torn into red brick.
 A lone pine tree behind a Jewish house.
 Loose footprints and the plain up to the horizon.
 The dust of quicklime, wagons rolling,
 and in the wagons a whining lament.
 Take a mandolin, on the mandolin
 you’ll play it all.
 Heigh-ho. Fingers, strings.⁸

At that time the catastrophic attitude of Miłosz was not built through apocalypses any more, but through visions of human degradation—similar to the ones depicted in *The Waste Land*. In this world the last remnant of art is a drunkard’s song and playing the mandolin.

While summing up his musings about Beckett, Miłosz wrote about a game, or more specifically, about the end of ‘endgame’. But what is crucial and, again, a tribute to the West, is the self-admission contained in Beckett’s one-word title: *Endgame*. And this endgame means not only the death of the individual, which can be stoically borne. It is the radical and pitiless proposition to the human imagination; the imagination which in the course of millennia has begotten religious myths, poems, dreams carved in stones, visions painted on wood and canvas; it may yet stir our emotions with its childlike faith, but we can only reflect nostalgically on a gift irretrievably lost. Since the eighteenth century the imagination has tried to wage a defence by fortifying itself on its own territory, that of art and literature, through the cultivation of multi-layered irony; in time, however, it became impaired from within and stripped of any ontological

⁸ Ibid., 66. The poem “Outskirts” was translated by Czeslaw Milosz.

support. The endgame is the end of literature and art, and, insofar as these have always attached to any civilization, of civilization itself.⁹

Artistry feeds, therefore, on the end of any artistry—wrote Miłosz about Beckett. "Endgame supports, for a short while, another endgame".

Was, for Beckett, "endgame after endgame" the only way of art's existence in the world after the catastrophe? If we accept Beckett's perspective as the only one and final—Yes, and now we know that "endgame after endgame" in the post-modernist version of this game may last for a long time. But Miłosz rebelled against this and wrote: Beckett's diagnosis is true, but narrow, his attitude is consistent, but it is one sided. For, as I understand my position, I transcend it, moreover I am free, I am different from five billion other human beings, I have a body and five senses, I feel, I remember, I am from somewhere, I think and imagine, I can order reality and name it, I am still capable of creation, and finally—I have will, that is I want and act. Therefore, I can run away from the land of Ulro, or, at least, live against it, which means to live against the hegemony of Reason, but not against science. While observing what was happening in the rational world, Miłosz was so moved by human passivity, so characteristic for Beckett's protagonists. These anti-heroes, whom he called with sarcasm "vege-animals" and "pale Elysian shadows": "a final testimony of overwhelming feature of Ulro (a civilization against itself) is the passivity of protagonists (who used to be heroes) in literature"—he wrote and then he offered a few pieces of advice on how to preserve, what I would call it, 'spiritual hygiene'.

Miłosz practices this 'spiritual hygiene' in *The Land of Ulro*, as if in passing, which could confuse readers unacquainted with his writings. Why, alongside Gombrowicz and Dostoyevsky, do we have, out of the blue, Mickiewicz as the author of *Sir Thaddeus*? What is the purpose of reminiscences of pre-war Vilnius with its inhabitants? What is the purpose of a fragment about religious songs he remembered from his childhood? Why are there so many

⁹ Czesław Miłosz, *The Land of Ulro*, op. cit., 242.

remembered pictures, sounds, tastes, things, emotions which covered door latches, bells, squares? One might get the impression that when entering the dialogue with alien spirits, Miłosz had, from time to time, visited spirits supporting him; that in order to fight on a foreign land he had to return to his own land, to strengthen himself. Even if this land was the land of memories and imagination, it was still real. That was the nature of Miłosz's trick, his slyness of a fox. Since "you see what you are" as Swedenborg wrote, then you should take care of yourself!

The Land of Ulro has the loose, chaotic structure of a *silva rerum*, a genre popular in Poland three or four centuries ago. It is relatively easy to reconstruct from this essay 'a codex of a fox', a set of practical advice for those who want to preserve their spiritual hygiene. I would formulate it in the following way. One: nurse in yourself a predilection for order, even though everything around is in chaos. Two: exercise your memory, so that you can rule time, not the other way round. Three: separate good from evil, stick to good, even though evil is constantly on top. Four: believe in what you see, even though a scientific 'truth' is different (The Earth revolves around the Sun, but for us the sun rises and sets—and let it stay this way). Five: at all costs cling to the concrete, and if your talent allows for it, describe it in such a way that you do not obstruct it. Six: search for sense against the absurd. Seven: if they call you naive, use irony in defence. Eight: Act.

This codex of a fox was established by Miłosz in the land of Ulro ultimately not to "put Etre (the being) down", "even in its tactile, earthly forms". "Therefore, I detest the theatre of Beckett and Ionesco," he wrote angrily to Jerzy Turowicz in 1962, although it seems that he was not right in accusing these two writers of nihilism. This codex was to be later translated into many brilliant poems, in which we could find the praise of an active, perennially young reason, which—personified, gifted with man's best features, beauty, strength and hope—would turn out to be the opposite to Blake's Reason. Obviously, I have in mind the well-known "Zaklęcie" ("Incantation"). We also have the praise of love, which is a return route to Paradise, as in the less

well known poem "Po wygnaniu" ("After Paradise") from the volume "Nieobjęta ziemia" ("Unattainable Earth") (1988), a fragment of which I would like to quote:

Don't run anymore
Quiet. How softly it rains
On the roofs of the city. How perfect
All things are. Now for the two of you
Waking up in a royal bed by a garret window.
For a man and a woman.
Into masculine and feminine which longed for each other.
Yes, this is my gift to you. Above ashes,
On a bitter, bitter earth [...].¹⁰

And then, we have the praise of reality in many epiphanic poems of Miłosz, for example, in my favourite, "Łąka" ("Meadow") (1994):

It was a riverside meadow, lush, from before the hay harvest,
On an immaculate day in the sun of June.
I searched for it, found it, recognized it.
Grasses and flowers grew there, familiar in my childhood.
With half-closed eyelids I absorbed luminescence.
And the scent garnered me, all knowing ceased.
Suddenly I felt I was disappearing and weeping with joy.¹¹

That is how you reconcile a quarrelling man's family: body, emotions, imagination and reason, although it would seem to be impossible after the end of the 'game'.

¹⁰ Czesław Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems 1931-2001*, translated by Czesław Miłosz and Robert Hass, Penguin Books, London, 2001, 407

¹¹ Czesław Miłosz, *Wiersze wybrane/Collected Poems*, op. cit., 415.