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MIŁOSZ'S JOB

Miłosz did not refrain from asking difficult questions, questions about the sense of suffering, about its individual and general dimensions, about the inevitability of guilt and the impossibility of redress, about rebellion against the perennial prosecutor of man. These questions often remain unanswered, they are not comfortable, we cannot run away from them. In this paper I would like to approach this aspect of Miłosz's writings, mostly in relation to the figure of the Biblical Job in his poetry, and to his translation of the Book of Job into Polish.

Miłosz's poetry does not describe suffering, it does not involve itself in an attempt to stop it, it does not even enter into an eternal debate on suffering, with more arguments to support the sense of suffering or to deny such sense. Miłosz's poetry has been interpreted differently: as an intensive presence (Ewa Bieńkowska), making the present real (Aleksander Fiut), bringing back the dimension of the *sacrum* to imagination and as defence against nihilism (Elżbieta Kieślak)—in the context of suffering this poetry makes suffering exist 'here and now'.

This effect of 'here and now' is accomplished in at least a few ways: through the intensity of seeing, concentration on an object, sensitivity and attention giving birth to empathy and anxiety, through showing its ambiguities and multidimensionality, which are not identical with the ambiguities and multidimensionality of reality. Thanks to such treatment, suffering in Miłosz's poetry is not manifested through pictures and visions full of drastic cruelty. Dynamics of events and dramatic tensions of lyric situations do not evoke unambiguous judgments on the theme of pain. The poetic presence

of suffering is removed from the martyrdom schemes of ‘hero-victim’ or the idealization of victims in general. Miłosz’s Job is not only a motif, he is a protagonist of poetry; he is not innocent, he is not perfect. Suffering is not only loss, illness, humiliation. Suffering is any change, in the same way as it is lack of change. No contentment is permanent, and the pathos of things—*lacrimae rerum*—leads to an understanding that everything is interconnected, interdependent, therefore conditioned, not-free. Rejection of the Messianic vision of suffering, as well as rejection of the vision based on martyrdom, which were born during Romanticism in Poland, and Miłosz’s great distance to the so called theology of suffering with the simultaneous religious attitude, directs the thoughts of readers to a statement that meetings of poetry with suffering in the intensity of the poetic picture may lead to acceptance of its presence, without rationalization and ‘theologization’, mostly from the perspective of experiences. Being close to the method of the world’s perception characteristic of *haiku*, freeing itself from an autobiographic approach and Cartesian determinism in ‘I’ perception, Miłosz’s poetry opens the European and Judeo-Christian attitude to suffering onto categories of *zen* philosophy (see his exchange of letters with Thomas Merton). Only Job, who lost everything, could taste freedom; he was not even conditioned by a wager between God and Satan. The totality of loss can become freedom only when the subject who experiences it also loses a craving to re-establish justice and justification.

Miłosz possessed this kind of intelligence, which allowed him to put together data which others were not able to combine. Ryszard Nycz, while describing this specific skill, lists three basic operations of the subject: re-contextualisation, redistribution of elements of existing context according to new, non-systemic rules, and resignation from arbitrariness of such re-shuffling. All these elements can be used in the analysis of the theme of Job in Miłosz’s poetry. The suffering and attitude of Miłosz’s Job are subjected to re-contextualisation: suffering as such does not connote punishment any more or damnation in a given system of values; on the other hand—it does not mean innocence either—this issue cannot be treated in

a dichotomous way, which would lead to the conclusion that from the story of Job, all sufferers are sinless.

Redistribution and the representative character of details make Miłosz's Job not only a Biblical figure, but also a figure of an author, hero-rebel and passive victim at the same time: a category which brings some order to a literary panorama. Aleksander Wat, for example, is often described by Miłosz as the contemporary Job. The case of Władysław Szpilman was identical: Miłosz together with Jerzy Andrzejewski told the story of Szpilman's survival in the script for the film *Robinson warszawski* (*Robinson from Warsaw*). Eventually, Miłosz, although he was the prime mover of the project, gave it up after the censor's intervention.

He stopped yielding to 'semantic temptation'—a search for the causes of evil, the sense of opposing it, which evokes further suffering. The inevitability of suffering leads to the temptation of searching for sense in what is arbitrary, non-reasonable and non-teleological, but the poet declares that he has accepted this question as a permanent companion, without hope, however, that this companion will show the way some time in the future.

First, in the times of early adolescence there was only intellectual equation, then there came suffering, my own, or accepted as my own, it reached me, settled down in me, and I had to learn how to cope with it. Mentally, little has changed, because the same question: "What is the source of evil?" is still awaiting an answer, with the only difference that now I do not search for an answer because I know that this theme cannot be dealt with only in an intellectual manner.¹

What, then, did Miłosz want to achieve when he embarked on the translation of the Book of Job? Miłosz explained it in "Słowo wstępne tłumacza" ("Translator's Foreword") to his translation:

While dealing with the issue of the choice for the translation of Biblical text, I cannot skip Vilnius, and this is particularly valid

¹ Czesław Miłosz, *Księgi biblijne*, Kraków 2003, 283.

in the case of the Book of Job. A year before matriculation exams, in 1928, I am sitting in the class of the First Boy's King Sigmundus Augustus High School in the religion lesson, and our teacher, father Leopold Chomski, is trying unsuccessfully to quench my rebellions. He did not like me, and now I know that he was right.²

Was this translation an exegesis of a kind? An attempt to return to a dialogue which was abandoned? A projected return, because is it not so that the Book of Job would have been the most appropriate text, the most appropriate stimulus, before what was to come soon? However, not a single Job expects tragedy, and this is exactly his tragedy. He grounds his safety on the logic and conviction of innocence. The gesture of translation may be interpreted as the gesture of identification, speaking with words of Holy texts in order to make sense of, and also, indirectly, to make one's own suffering sacred. This is like therapy, when one might express, without stating directly; one might enter the existing expression and simultaneously hide in it.

In his own life Miłosz experienced 'Job's history' several times, e.g. when he was rejected by Polish émigré circles after his decision to leave in exile, when he felt lonely and forgotten in the 1960s, when he experienced family tragedies.³ All this resulted in a situation when the Book of Job became for Miłosz a 'mirror' of his own life (Josif Brodski called him "the Job of our century").⁴ Andrzej Franaszek's biography of Miłosz includes a separate chapter entitled "Hiob" ("Job").⁵ However, the extent of Miłosz's identification with Job goes, in my opinion, much deeper, beyond the level of a painful

² Ibidem.

³ Ibidem.

⁴ In 1967 younger son of Miłosz, while staying in Alaska, was diagnosed with a very serious disease. Almost at the same time Miłosz's wife, Janka, was diagnosed with cancer of the spine. The disease led to almost total paralysis and her death in 1986. She required constant help, which Miłosz gave her. (See Andrzej Franaszek, *Wieczne światło zatrzymanego czasu*, w: *Czesław Miłosz. In memoriam*, [ed. by Joanna Gromek], Kraków 2004, 38). See *Czesław Miłosz. In memoriam*, op. cit., 209.

⁵ Andrzej Franaszek, *Miłosz. Biografia*, Kraków 2011.

biography. It is more primary, in other words all suffering, which he has been exposed to, are only probable consequences of existence as a physical, emotional and spiritual being. Job's experience in Miłosz's writing is a way of human existence whose interpretative tradition was most inspiring for Miłosz, who said in an interview with Renata Gorczyńska:

Now, I will tell you about Blake's interpretation of the Book of Job: Towards the end of his life he illustrated the Book of Job with wonderful engravings on copper. And his own philosophy of life is presented there, as if by the way. So, at the beginning Job is a man proud of his integrity. And he complains that his children behave indecently. He has, as is known, seven sons. All of them are young, and as no wives are mentioned we may assume that they all live with mistresses. Job does not like it. His daughters—as he had daughters—represent Poetry, Painting and Music, but they are not greeted and treated warmly in their father's house. The sons play some music, so they are, so to speak, a bit on the side of the vice of art. The death of the sons is symbolic. It means a break between children and parents. The calamities which Job experiences are his internal states, maturing to true religion, because when God appears to Job he has a devil's foot. In other words, the God who torments him, is a devil. Then, at one moment, a good God appears to him, and he has Job's face. This is a great God of forgiveness. The whole poem is presented as Job's internal growing up from the direction of revenge, from cruel and tough law, to understanding the role of forgiveness, goodness, arts, things which in Blake's interpretation are connected.⁶

Blake, the author of illustrations to the Book of Job,⁷ questioned Job's innocence, claiming that Job sinned through excessive

⁶ See Czesław Miłosz, Renata Gorczyńska, „*Podróżny świata*”. *Rozmowy*, Kraków 2002, 291.

⁷ Bo Lindberg wrote an interesting and profound scholarly paper about these illustrations: Bo Lindberg, *William Blake's Illustrations to the Book of Job*, Abo 1973.

attachment to material goods, which brought the punishment.⁸ The suffering which he experienced cleansed him. It was to devour his self-love and make him concentrate on spiritual, not material, temporary values.⁹ In this quote we could see Miłosz's concentration on the father-children, projected not only onto the personal level, but also on the perspective of the man-God relationship. Is God, who has such botched children, innocent? Or maybe... He is simply exempt from punishment?

It is certain that Miłosz did not accept all the elements of Blake's interpretation. However, some of them can be discerned in his translation.¹⁰ Right from the beginning of the book Job is presented as a "faultless" man, who is free from any possible faults or weaknesses. The calamities he experiences create rebellion and grudges in his heart; he does not understand why God "for no reason" has made

⁸ See Geoffrey Keynes, *Blake Studies. Essays on His Life and Work*, 2nd ed., Oxford 1971, .188.

⁹ See Ewa Kozubska, Jan Tomkowski, *Mistyczny świat Williama Blake'a*, Milanówek 1993, 38; also: Michael Justin Davis, *William Blake. A New Kind of Man*, Berkeley 1977, .142-144.

¹⁰ Lev Shestov's influence cannot be forgotten" "Why does Shestov influence me so strongly?" Because he, as is the case with Russians, wants to repair the world from the beginning, And he says 'Eh, three thousand years of Greek philosophy is nothing, let us start from the beginning". And he returns to the Bible, to the Book of Job, but he, at the same time, is very daring while operating within philosophical tradition". (*Autoportret przekorny.*, Kraków 2002, 48-49); See also other Miłosz statements concerning Shestov: "Shestov, the enemy of reason, wants to defend unlimited freedom and the omnipotence of the Biblical God, and he contrasts Jerusalem with Athens in this sense, so he is for faith and against claims of knowledge. Job is an ideal for him, because he refused to accept the rational explanations of his suffering offered to him by his wise friends, And the one who, in the name of faith, gave a radical challenge to rationalized Christianity, was, according to him, Martin Luther. who had been preceded by Tertulian («Credo quia absurdum») and Pietro Damiani in the Middle Ages." (Czesław Miłosz, *Życie na wyspach*, Kraków 1997, 77); "Shestov's passion was to repeat constantly: "No!", and raise hands to God in Job's protest. Expecting what? A miracle, of course. But miracles do not happen! Exactly, we are told so by the knowledge of the chain of causes and effects. Dismal knowledge." (78).

him endure all this. It is characteristic that Miłosz's Job does not call this experience tragedy or calamity, but anguish, that is a state of struggling with something, painful, devoid of dynamics, with no climax or relief. This permanent monotony of suffering becomes one more challenge. In Miłosz's translation Job dies "replete with days".¹¹ The word used in the original *soba* (full) can also be translated, which is the result of the structure of the consonant core, as "satisfied".¹²

The story of Job in Miłosz's interpretation is seen from the perspective of the mystical experience¹³ of loss, which brings greater good. The protagonist of the Book of Job is freed from fear, that he had missed something, that his absent-mindedness might bring about God's wrath. He lived through despair.

In Miłosz's text, written before World War II, the motif of Job was not introduced directly. The theme that dominates is of apocalypse fulfilled, fear which is imagined, therefore tamed and domesticated. The realities of World War II verified this domestication, discredited the possibility of expression, and soon the Book of Job became for many one of the primary texts; it became the book of personal salvation.¹⁴

Echoes of the Book of Job can be found in the ending of the long poem "Kronika miasta Pornic" ("A Chronicle of the Town of Pornic") (included in the volume *Król Popiel (King Popiel)*, being a poetic

¹¹ Similarly to Abraham (Gen 25:8) and David (1 Chron 23:1).

¹² See Marek Piela, *Grzech dosłowności we współczesnych polskich przekładach Starego Testamentu*, Kraków 2003, 212–213.

¹³ Julian Warzecha presented an interesting interpretation of Walter Vogels, according to which Job evolves. Mostly under the influence of Elihu's speeches, Job changed his attitude from that of shouting, lamentation and remorse into a meaningful silence: "In this way Job moved to the level of mysticism, where words are replaced by silence, where speaking and listening are replaced by seeing (J. Warzecha, *W poszukiwaniu klucza do Księgi Hioba*, „Studia Theologica Varsaviensia” 1985, no. 2, 141).

¹⁴ See Wojciech Skrodzki, *Lebenstein i księga Hioba*, „Więź” 1982, no. 4–5, 222; Anna Szczepan-Wojnarska, *Wybaczyć Bogu. Hiob w literaturze podejmującej problematykę II wojny światowej*, Kraków 2009

expression of existential anguish:¹⁵ The sentence ending the poem is of particular importance:

Prosiłem Boga, żeby zrobił ze mną, co zechce,
I mówiłem mu, że jestem wdzięczny
Nawet za bezsenność, kiedy huczy przyplływ,
I rachunek życia.¹⁶

However, talking about being grateful is not identical to feeling gratitude, or being grateful.¹⁷ This is like a word-game to give God what belongs to God. We owe God gratitude, the subject has this painful knowledge, what he should give God, how he should behave, what to feel. It is a mystic or an artist who can ask God to do what he wants, because such a request may be conditioned by love or despair. Its radical nature in the context of the phrase introduced with some scepticism about the “bill of life” directs us more to despair and helplessness. A similar idea is contained in a poetic phrase from the cycle “Zdania (“Sentences”) (from the volume *Hymn o perle* (*Hymn to the Pearl*)) entitled “Do ut des”

He felt thankful, so he could not believe in God.¹⁸

Miłosz himself commented on this line in the following way:

Ultimately we may believe in God [through] gratitude for all the gifts he gave us. Also thorns. So I can believe through gratitude. I need a lot of camels, asses and sheep, and I always trust that I will get

¹⁵ See Barbara Kryda, *Słowacki i Miłosz na skałach Pornic*, in *Studia i szkice o twórczości Czesława Miłosza*, ed. by Andrzej Staniszewski, Olsztyn 1995, 119.

¹⁶ “I asked God to do with me whatever he wanted,/And I told him that I was grateful,/Even for insomnia, when the tide is coming,/And the bill of life.”

¹⁷ “I came naked from my mother’s womb, and I will be naked when I leave. The Lord gave me what I had, and the Lord has taken it away. Praise the name of the Lord!” (Job 1:20). “Should we accept only good things from the hand of God and never anything bad? (Job 2:10). (New Living Translation)

¹⁸ Czesław Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems 1931-2001*, HarperCollins, New York, 2001, 352.

them. And when suffering comes one bears it. Maybe it is a bit like in the Book of Job, when Job says: we have accepted good things, will we not accept bad things?¹⁹

This is a surprising confession. Faith through gratitude becomes a formula truly pure, giving value and dignity to a subject. Only a paradoxical action of a subject might become an answer to the paradoxical actions of God.

The volume *Na brzegu rzeki (Facing the River)*²⁰ contains an eschatological parable extended to two poems: "Zdarzenie gdzie indziej" ("Happenings Elsewhere") and "Po odcierpieniu" ("After Enduring"). The first of these lyric poems is a story made to look like a folk *gawęda*, a fairy tale, a tale with a moral. The main protagonist, Adamek (literally, 'little Adam', he is a like the Biblical Adam, and maybe stands for man in general), is rescued from the devil's captivity by a mysterious man "with a shotgun", who addresses him with words which are similar to the words used by Job's friends:

Where did you get the idea that you are innocent?
Did you really believe you could sin without guilt?
I am sent to announce the verdict.²¹

He is sentenced to a stay in Purgatory, where Adamek, through constant contact with suffering, gradually loses conviction about his own innocence. He must be cleansed of this wrong assumption in order to be eventually convinced that the only sentence he really deserves is that of eternal rejection; this rejection is not only the result of the fact that man is saved only thanks to the grace of God.

"After Enduring", on the other hand, is a poetic commentary of a theological nature on "Happenings Elsewhere", in which suffering

¹⁹ Czesław Miłosz, Renata Gorczyńska, „*Podróżny świata*”..., op. cit., Kraków 2002, 229.

²⁰ Czesław Miłosz, *Facing the River*, translated by Czesław Miłosz and Robert Hass, Carcanet, Manchester, 1995.

²¹ Czesław Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems 1931-2001*, Harper Collins, New York, 2010, 636.

is perceived as an important component of man's relationship with God.

"Alkoholik wstępuje do niebios" ("An Alcoholic Enters the Gate of Heaven" (from the volume *To (It)*) can be perceived as the fullest and most mature poetic reflection of Miłosz on the sense of Job's ordeal.

[...] Not suspecting that you had picked me from the Book of Genes
for another experiment altogether.
As if there were not proof enough
that free will is useless against destiny.²²

Salvation is an answer to the acceptance of destiny. Despite the fact that his life was determined by a genetically coded suffering of an addiction, an alcoholic does not accuse the Creator. His speech is not devoid of bitter words, which do not, however, exclude the possibility of a dialogue. He wants to understand, to find not so much sense as the answer to the question of whether God really cares about him.

Under your amused glance I suffered
like a caterpillar impaled on the spike of a blackthorn.²³

The alcoholic asks:

why do you torture me?
Is it a trial like Job's, so that I call faith a phantom
and say: You are not, nor do your verdicts exist,
and the earth is ruled by accident?²⁴

The lyric 'I' does not succumb, however, to the temptation of accusation or rejection of God. This is the most logical of possible ways of behaviour. Job cannot ally himself with his prosecutor.

²² Ibid., 734.

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Ibidem.

Paradoxically, he remains faithful, although he himself cannot understand this.

I pray to you, for I do not know how not to pray.
Because my heart desires you,
though I do not believe you would cure me.
And so it must be, that those who suffer will continue to suffer,
praising your name.²⁵

The diction of paradox used in this fragment connotes poetics of 'mysterious texts' (gnostic or mystic), which in human language try to describe 'non-human' experience or a contact with the sphere of the *sacrum*. So, a border exists, beyond which man cannot go, a question exists which, although it has been asked for thousands of years, there is still no reply to in earthly realities. People are saved only by faith against hope, acceptance of anguish as an immanent dimension of our existence. Knowledge about a 'non-cure' does not change anything in the relationship between God and man.

The motif of Job also came up in Miłosz's articles in periodicals published before World War II. In March 1938 in one of the articles Miłosz wrote:

The dignity of this anxiety is enormous. It is a testimony of the fact that the Godhead's addressing men does not cease, that in the period of idolatrous totalitarianisms, in the roar of trumpets, in the din of political platforms, man prays with the same words as Job, when he was touched, with God's permission, by the hand of the devil. "What is Man that you value him so much? And that you show heart to him? That you visit him every morning? And experience him every moment? Absolute loneliness, fear of death at dawn, are part of our experience, just as centuries ago."²⁶

The dismal antics in which we all, willingly or not, have taken part (for these antics were history with a capital H) seem to enjoin us to sprinkle our heads with ashes and weep like Job – but our Job

²⁵ Ibid., 735.

²⁶ Czesław Miłosz, *Przygody młodego umysłu*, Kraków 2003, 201.

shook with laughter for his own fate and, at the same time for the fate of others. Every television switched on, every newspaper taken in hand, evokes pity and terror, but a derisive pity and a derisive terror.²⁷

The experiences of World War II taught the Jobs of that period to keep an ideological distance, and they stigmatized them with the stigma of derisory laughter. Miłosz's irony was, in fact, a form of defence against appropriation by historians, available only to those who experienced suffering, to whom no one can try to explain what suffering and loss mean, because they know about it better than anyone else. This knowledge of suffering allows them to feel irony towards the world, towards its accidental nature, towards its illusory authorities. The motif of Job in the context of World War II returns in Miłosz's essays in the notes inspired by the reading of Viktor Frankl's *Trotzdem Ja Zum Leben Sagen: Ein Psychologe erlebt das Konzentrationslager*, (*Nevertheless, Say "Yes" to Life: A Psychologist Experiences the Concentration Camp*).

For him, the psychiatrist, the turning point came when, having received striped clothes which had been worn by a co-prisoner who had been killed, he found in a pocket a piece of paper torn out of a Hebrew prayer book, with the prayer Shema Israel. It is a prayer full of agreement to everything one receives from God. Where is the sense? As it happened to Job, the sense is removed: I do not know it, because I cannot understand God's ways, but this sense exists *beyond* my consciousness. The question arises of whether this prisoner had been so obsessed in his mind by people that he kept the Hebrew page against them, or if there had been true 'one to one' contact. Dr Frankl was convinced of the latter.²⁸

At this moment Miłosz breaks this reflection and does not take it to a clear conclusion. While treating poetry as a sense creating being, he does not believe, however, in sense written by men. One might get

²⁷ Czesław Miłosz, *Visions from San Francisco Bay*, translated by Richard Lourie, Carcanet New Press, 1982, 172-173.

²⁸ Czesław Miłosz, *Prywatne obowiązki*, Kraków 2001, 193.

the impression, although that this is only a hypothesis, that Miłosz was not wholly convinced by Frankl's reminiscences, which end in this way:

We in the camp all knew and repeated it to one another, that no happiness in life can recompense for what we were suffering there. Anyway, we were not thinking about happiness, [...] And the crowning of all the experiences of a man who has returned home was the wonderful feeling that after all I have suffered, I will not have to be afraid of anything in the world—except for my God.²⁹

For Miłosz, freeing oneself from terror seems impossible. Existential anxiety is not be removed, and paradoxically again, this preserves, saves faith.

In *Milosz's ABC*, on the other hand, he argues:

Countless people, in the past and those who live with us, experienced, have experienced and experience misfortunes, although this is a weak form of consolation. But because suffering is so common, the Book of Job is still alive. The first act of it is to treat calamities as punishment, which is what Job's friends try to convince him of. And if it was not for the theological dimension of the argument with them, I would say that they are right: calamities are like revenge, like punishment, and because at that moment they remind themselves of their sins, it all seems to fit together. Job defends himself, claiming that he is innocent, which should make us wonder: why is he so certain of his virtues? But, this something, which might be called act two in the Book of Job, is a defence of God, as someone different from a dispenser of prizes and punishment. If Job is innocent, then it means that God sends calamities because he so wishes, and therefore our ideas of what is just and what is not do not apply to Him.³⁰

²⁹ Viktor E. Frankl, *Psycholog w obozie koncentracyjnym*, transl. by Stefania Zgórska, Warszawa 1962, 102.

³⁰ Czesław Miłosz, *Milosz's ABC's*, translated by Madeline G. Levine, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2001, 201-202.=

COLLOQUIA LITTERARIA

Thinking about a permanent intellectual search for relationships with God leads to the reflection that, in a way, they are Job's suffering, and attempts to understand God are doomed to failure. What is left is faith through gratitude and opening oneself to suffering, saving fear of Yahweh, when hell is known so well and nothing seems terrifying any more. Job's suffering is loss, treachery, alienation, limitations, awareness of one's weaknesses, helplessness, and finally the torment of being this unique 'I', who is...