

TERESA DOBRZYŃSKA

**THE MOTIVES OF EYES, BLINDNESS AND LIGHT
IN LATE POETIC WORKS OF CZESLAW MIŁOŚZ***

Visual perception and its accompanying cognitive processes form an extremely important area of human activity – the space of solidified scenarios of behaviour and remarkable interpretative activity that accompanies specialised texts. It is an area where the biological human nature – the nature of a being that has got the sense of sight and is capable of using it on a large scale – is subject to cultural regulations, influenced as it is by social practices, and resulting from development of various visual techniques. The relevance of this sphere is testified to by consolidated convictions about an optic or visual nature of cognition, reflected in the notions as fundamental to any utterance and work of art as ‘point of view’ or ‘perspective’/‘prospect’; and, similarly, by abundance of linguistic metaphors and poetic methods of depiction, based upon the domain of sight. The motifs of eyes, seeing, viewing, watching, looking at oneself and others, appearance, visualisation, image and imaging, reflection and mirror – as well as the oppositions: blindness, overlooking, creation of false images and apparent reflections, and emergence of erroneous concepts, images or depictions – appear in myths and fables, forming the subject of philosophical analyses and the source of multiple fictional threads unfolding in literary pieces and various works of art.

* The paper has been published in the volume: *Литературознанието като възможност за избор. Сборник в чест на Рая Кунчева – The Literary Studies as a Possibility of Choice. In Honorem Raya Kuncheva, M. Yanakieva et al. (eds.)*, Sofia 2012, Контекст, pp. 57-65.

The conglomerate of notions and ideas referred to hereinabove has formed a dateless subject of reflection among philosophers and a perennial object of interest to anthropologists, literary students and art critics, including theoreticians of modern visual arts, such as photography or motion picture. To refer to a reasonably selected and representative set of elaborations upon the area in question would be out of anyone's reach as they appear in enormous numbers; moreover, the selection of the subject-matter and direction of analysis is conditional upon scholarly discipline, the researcher's outlook or aesthetic assumptions forming the foundation of a given artistic current. The collective-author volume *Vision and Cognition*¹, recently prepared by Bulgarian and Polish research teams, conceived and co-edited by Professor Raya Kuncheva, is an attempt at outlining the notional field of our interest, putting forth a handful of afterthoughts on its individual constituents.

Let us take a look at this rich area of notions and ideas, or indeed at its certain selected fragments, from the perspective (or viewpoint²) of experiences and reflections of a single man – Czesław Miłosz. The subject of our inspection here is the late period of this outstanding Polish poet's output, as recorded in his volume *Druga przestrzeń* ['The Second Space'] (2002) and in the posthumous *Wiersze ostatnie* ['The Last Poems'] (2006), whose content and layout have been worked out by their pietistic editor³. The period is one when Miłosz, ninety years' old then, grows aware of the sharpness of his sight – so important to man's contact with the world – getting deteriorated.

¹ *Vision and Cognition / Взгляд и познание*, T. Dobrzyńska and Raya Kuncheva (eds.), Sofia, in print.

² These categories, similarly to the expressions "Let us take a look at ...", "subject of our inspection" are obviously the specific realisations of the notional cognition-modelling metaphor 'TO SEE IS TO KNOW' [which in Polish appears as an interesting pun: 'widzieć to wiedzieć'].

³ See C. Miłosz, *Druga przestrzeń* ['Second Space'], Wydawnictwo Znak, Kraków 2002; idem, *Wiersze ostatnie*, collected, rewritten and dated by Agnieszka Kosińska, Wydawnictwo Znak, Kraków 2006.

This particularly nasty experience incites him to certain essential reflections and revaluations.

In one poem written in that period, the aged poet talks to his own eyes, approaching them as autonomous beings and addressing them in much a respectful manner:

Eyes

My most honourable eyes, you are not in the best of shape.
I receive from you an image that is less than sharp,
And if a colour, then it's dimmed.
And you were a pack of royal greyhounds once,
With whom I would set out early mornings.
My wondrous quick eyes, you saw many things,
Lands and cities, islands and oceans.
Together we greeted immense sunrises
When the fresh air set us running on trails
Where the dew had just begun to dry.
Now what you have seen is hidden inside me
And changed into memories or dreams.
I am slowly moving away from the fairgrounds of the world
And I notice in myself a distaste
For the monkeyish dress, the screams and the drumbeats.
What a relief. To be alone with my meditation
On the basic similarity in humans
And their tiny grain of dissimilarity.
Without eyes, my gaze is fixed on one bright point,
That grows large and takes me in.⁴

July 22, 2001

This poem describes the role of the eyes in the earlier periods of the poet's life through the reference to three spheres of experiencing things. First, the experience of a young huntsman who comes out for hunting at dawn with a pack of greyhounds; then comes the experience of a man travelling across continents and receiving many impressions;

⁴ Czeslaw Milosz, *Second Space; New Poems*, transl. by Czeslaw Milosz and Robert Hass, Ecco, New York, 2004, 31.

lastly, the experience of a physically fit man, practicing his jogging at sunrise, with the morning dew not yet dried. In those three situations, the eyes prove to be capable of making observations efficiently and providing experiences – including aesthetic impressions. All those situations are grounded in Milosz’s personal experiences he has been through at various times and in various places: from pre-war-time Polish eastern borderland area to America; since these situations prove typical to the lifestyles of specific milieus, they are part of certain cultural circumstances. Hunting with greyhounds evokes a recollection of Polish landed-gentry customs – hunting expeditions of a young master, the thing Milosz was through in his youth years, in Lithuania⁵, which did not differ much – probably just scale-wise – from the greyhound-led hunts described by Adam Mickiewicz in the epic *Pan Tadeusz*, or the hunts with hounds, as recorded in Stefan Żeromski’s novel *Popioły* [‘The Ashes’] – with its famous opening sentence: “Ogary poszły w las” [“The hounds rushed into the forest”]. *The situation of wanderer was, in turn, shared by many a person contemporary to Milosz, as they moved from one country or continent to another: the lot of post-war émigrés (and of earlier ones too, albeit those ones travelled not that intensively), and of travellers and tourists using the opportunity of learning the world. Lastly, jogging in the morning is a form of practicing a sport that was initially popular in the United States, as portrayed e.g. in the movie Forrest Gump, and subsequently in several countries of the Euro-American civilisation circle. In Milosz’s concept, this type of physical activity is enriched by a spiritual dimension. Rather than being a mere morning jogtrot, the run is justified by the opportunity it provides to contemplate ‘immense sunrises’ – where there is nothing to becloud the horizon, the running man experiences the joy of direct contact with nature, moving along “trails where the dew had just begun to dry”.*

⁵ Cf. e.g. the poem *Jak można zapomnieć* – cf. C. Milosz, *Wiersze* [‘Poems’], vol. 2, Krakow-Wroclaw: Wydawnictwo Literackie 1984. The poem mentions the names of many a dog that accompanied the author in hunts and roams.

The richness of experiences acquired owing to the eyes has been cognitively processed and consolidated in the poet's memory. Now, those experiences are back with him, reproduced in his dreams (understood in their literal shape or appearing in the form of daydreaming or visions – in his 'mind's eye', as Shakespeare would put it⁶). The impression-acquiring eyes turned out to be equally efficient in their searching as the hunting hounds running in all directions and nuzzling for the game. They did have opportunities to watch the varieties of the world – like travellers moving across many countries. They also could experience delight while contemplating sunrises, i.e. watching the cosmic phenomenon meaning the reappearance of brightness – doing which is not quite usual with dwellers of cities, constrained as they are within tightly developed areas.

Let us memorise this association between the eyes and brightness, light and the sun. It is significant to Miłosz's course of thought and is expressed in his other poems too.

These identified characteristics of the sight of a young (or at least mature) man, the efficiency of his eyes capable of grasping the wealth of impressions, curious about the surrounding world, full of a *joie-de-vivre* and captivated with the beauty of phenomena – all this forms a transient status, a good that has been lost. Once the old age comes over, the eyes lose their perceptive capacity and transmit a blurred turbid-coloured image: "I receive from you an image that is less than sharp, // And if a colour, then it's dimmed." These symptoms of gradual loss of sight are combined with meaningful afterthoughts and revaluations. On the one hand, the aged poet values high the images recorded in his memory, whilst on the other, feels a relief based on not having to partake any more in the blustering 'fairgrounds of the world'. Deprived of the ability to see images, he has paradoxically preserved his ability to look: "Without eyes, my gaze is fixed ..." This 'fixed gaze' is of a very special sort, being a form

⁶ Cf.: "HAMLET: My father! – methinks I see my father. – HORATIO: O where, my lord? – HAMLET: In my mind's eye, Horatio." W. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I, 2.

of focusing the cognitive powers on a single – bright – point and a sense of contact with pervasive light.

The ‘seeing blind man’ paradox contained in the phrase “Without eyes, my gaze is fixed ...” has an ancient tradition behind it in the European culture, and relates to identification of acquisition of knowledge with visual perception. This notional metaphor is unfolded in comprehension of knowledge in terms of light; hence, science and learning as the enlightenment of mind. As ‘seeing in a clear way’, understanding becomes – by way of notional projection – a specific sort of seeing, differing however from ordinary visual perception which is limited to recognising things illuminated with physical light. Ordinary superficial view, focused on appearances and not infrequently leading to cognitive errors, is juxtaposed here with in-depth mental inspection – penetrating through the nature of things and reaching for the truth, thus enabling to see clearly. Seeing as understanding or comprehension has since the earliest times been extended to ability of pervading secrets, guessing the future – clairvoyance. For this type of seeing, eyes are not indispensable and can even be a hindrance. Juxtapositions of this sort underlie the idea of blind clairvoyant sage – a topos applied in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, impersonated by Tiresias the augur. Oedipus, who makes himself blind, confirms that a notional configuration of this sort does exist and the two types of view or inspection are discernible.

In his analysis of the archaic senses of the Sophocles’ tragedy, Sergey Averintsev considers the relation between seeing and knowing, as solidified in an archaic system of ideas and rooted in the Old-Greek language. Yet the scholar stipulates that “looking into the outside, the sight bears an outer knowledge, one that focuses on the surface of things”⁷. Following up this direction of thinking, the Greek culture

⁷ See: S. Averintsev, *W poszukiwaniu symboliki mitu o Edypie* [‘In search of the symbolism of the Oedipus myth’], in: idem, *Na skrzyżowaniu tradycji (szkice o literaturze i kulturze wczesnobizantyjskiej)* [‘On the crossroads of traditions (essays on early Byzantine literature and culture)’], transl. into Polish, introduction and biographical notes by D. Ulicka, PIW, Warszawa 1988, 166.

created an opposition of (optical) seeing of appearances and (mental) seeing of things essential.

There exists in the Greek culture [...] countervailed comprehension of visibility as an empty delusion. [...] In terms of this concept, that is, the one who unmasks the invisible, the contemplator of the essence, ought to be blind. The oracular Tiresias, the oracular Homer, and the oracular Demodocus were all blind. Of Tiresias, it is moreover known that he had lost his sight in parallel with receiving the gift of prophesying; Homer says of Demodocus that he had been blinded by a Muse, which tended to be readily referred to Homer himself. This symbolism was interestingly generalised thereafter by the Greek philosophy. [...] Particularly colourful is the known story of Democritus who is said to have gouged out his eyes so he could see the invisible more clearly. Distrustful toward this legend, Plutarch has conveyed it thus: "So, although what they say about Democritus is untrue, namely, that he had voluntarily taken his own sight [...] – this to prevent the eyes from disturbing the peace of thought, by incessantly calling it out, instead of letting it quietly stay at home and take care of matters spiritual."⁸

Recognition of the two types of seeing leads to an ironical confrontation of Oedipus – seeing but blinded with appearances, and Tiresias – blind but capable of seeing the deep meaning of phenomena. Seeing appearances gets disgraced as to its cognitive function. Oedipus pricks out his eyes as he is eager to really see through!

Let us now get back to the situation described in the Miłosz poem. The aged poet is losing his sight but at the same time has his gaze "fixed on one bright point" – the gaze being his mind's eyes, the inner cognitive powers. It is these mental powers that enable him to e.g. ponder "On the basic similarity in humans // And their tiny grain of dissimilarity". Like it has happened with the seeing, the sense of brightness or clarity and light has been split meaning-wise. These are no longer just physical phenomena, but instead, spiritual qualities

⁸ Averintsev, op. cit., pp. 167-168. Quote after Plutarch – cf. idem, *De curios*, 12, p. 521ff. (Plutarch, *On Inquisitiveness*, in his *Moralia*).

attracting humans due to their peculiar value: the poem's character's gaze is "fixed on one bright point" and cannot get distracted from it.

The notion of brightness, or clarity, is at times referred culturally to the sphere of cognition – indeed, a clear and undoubtful one, as in the phrases: "I've got a clear idea of what this means"; "This matter remains unclear to me"; a 'dim', i.e. uneducated, person; etc. Brightness/clarity and darkness are also the carriers of symbolic meanings regarding the moral: it is an archetypal symbolism which is also present in C. Milosz's output. In his poem *Człowiek wielopiętrowy*⁹, the brightness (of a dawn) and darkness appear in conjunction with a spatial symbolism: 'up'/'down', displaying the analogous meanings:

Here walks a many-tiered man.
On his upper floors a morning crispness
and underneath dark chambers
which are frightening to enter.¹⁰

These meanings of brightness/clarity – be it cognitive or good-related – is not what the poem *Oczy/Eyes* is about. Milosz's poetry is not confessional, or confinable to limits of traditional confessions; moreover, the aged poet presents in his last pieces a degradation of physical powers and the misfortunes of senility – without concealment and in a shocking fashion – finding, with bitter irony:

What have the heavenly powers to say of this?
They take afternoon walks, they notice.¹¹

Nonetheless, in his numerous late-date texts noticeable is a great desire for transcendence – for contact with divine providence, one that he could feel in his childhood years as 'the Presence', remaining virtually incapable of identifying it completely with some canonical religious concept. For one thing, then, the poet perceives life as

⁹ From the volume *Druga przestrzeń*, which also contains the poem *Oczy[Eyes]*

¹⁰ Czesław Miłosz, *Second Space; New Poems*, op. cit., 34

¹¹ See poem *Degradacja*, in: *Druga przestrzeń* collection.

a "revolution of the seasons, descent into the earth"¹², for another, he draws a picture of Paradise with a sky "whereon the sun stands for love"¹³

It is this sunlit aura, the light of the early morning, emanation of brightness that expresses the spiritual states accompanying one whilst approaching the transcendental powers.¹⁴ In the poem under analysis, there is the 'bright point', expanding and overwhelming the troubled old man. The brightness is caught sight of in spite of weakened visual acuity. The image of it is remindful of descriptions of brightness getting revealed in experiences of dying people – as reproduced by those who were meant to be back from their 'life after life', once their consciousness was regained.

But the experiences described by Milosz do not need to be made that specific. He has expressed, in archetypal terms, the state of final coalescence with what is good, with an emanation of divine love. While losing his physical sight, an old man, anguished with powerlessness, has regained the clarity of seeing the utmost good and love.

Unification with brightness/clarity is not equivalent here to a much resigned acquiescence to irresistible death, at the loss of corporal powers and inability to enjoy the life.¹⁵ Brightness discloses itself here as a force that attracts man, extricating him from anguish, and liberating him. A contact with it has clearly certain religious implications – it is the ascension, of a sort. It is accompanied by

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ See poem *Ja*, in: *Druga przestrzeń*.

¹⁴ On discussing the symbolism of light, Władysław Kopaliński, the outstanding Polish lexicographer, enumerates its symbolic meanings such as e.g.: eternity, spirit, impalpability, immateriality, life, happiness, glory, God, Christ, heaven, sanctity, enlightenment; cf. W. Kopaliński, *Słownik symboli* ['A Dictionary of Symbols'], Warszawa 1990; entry: ŚWIATŁO ['Light'], p. 415.

¹⁵ Such sense of the conclusion of the poem *Eyes* has been suggested by Ira Sadoff in his discussion of the content of the volume *Second Space*; Sadoff has found no religious thread therein, which in my view is a groundless approach. Cf. I. Sadoff, *Czesław Milosz and the Late Style*, 'The American Poetry Review', March/April 2007, vol. 36, Issue 2, p. 47.

inner peace and a sense of having grasped the truth. In his poem *Późna dojrzałość/Late Maturity* (published in the same collection), the poet says:

Not soon, as late as the approach of my ninetieth year,
I felt a door opening in me and I entered
The clarity of early morning.¹⁶

“The door” which “opened” to reveal spiritual spaces of a sort, enabling to understand what has once been inaccessible, means a state equivalent to eyes opened to hitherto-unconceivable dimensions of being. We reassume at this point the figure of blind sage – the paradox of regaining the acuity of seeing upon loss of the physical sight. Rendering oneself subject to emanation of light means unification with transcendental powers; hence, the accompanying internal peace and joy.

The image of “one bright point”, extending and overwhelming the old man getting blind, contains yet another paradox – one of an infinitely capacious point that, as we are taught by geometry, is dimensionless, after all. Although the cosmogony of our time accepts the theory of a point-confined commencement of the universe and gradual expansion of matter, the imaging offered by Miłosz does not imply astronomical references of such clarity. Rather than that, it is set in the tradition of images of sacrum as expressed in a series of oxymoronic phrases in the Christmas carol *Bóg się rodzi* [‘God is Born] by Franciszek Karpiński, with its “Power Trembles, // The fire subsides, the splendour is veiled, // the Infinite is encompassed”. A similar association of physical blindness with seeing of another sort – a ‘new sight’, and a similar identification of God with the sun, can be found in one of the pieces in the *Wiersze ostatnie* collection¹⁷. Symptomatically enough, the poem is written from the standpoint of a community, as is the case with group prayers or hymns:

¹⁶ Czesław Miłosz, *Second Space; New Poems*, op. cit., 4

¹⁷ See *** (“Obróćeni twarzami ku Niemu... [‘With our faces turned toward Him ...’]”), in: C. Miłosz, *Wiersze ostatnie*, op. cit.

Turning our faces to Him,
we were granted new eyesight, able
to look into the Sun.

Wasn't it always
our greatest wish
to live and to dwell for ages in brightness

Blind, lame, paralytic, twisted
we lived in the vigor of the years we recovered.

Time past, time present, and time future
Joined in a single as-if time.

That which was, what is, and what will be
Appeared impossible to tell apart.

At last we understood our life,
with all of what happened in it.¹⁸

The thought of divine clarity brings about a hope in the difficult time of Miłosz's late old years. More of a desire than ascertainment, perhaps, it is rooted in a torment and expressed in moments of despondence, "[i]n the depths of my depression, I found a world without hope,/And its colour was gray, like a day fenced off by clouds from the sun".¹⁹ In search of a source of hope, Miłosz turns to the centuries-old tradition of religious thought, as developed in various cultural circles. Using the language of psalms, he summons, using the language of psalms, Amon, Zeus and Yahweh, to take him to their choirs!²⁰

The much desired-for contact with Transcendent Powers is shown here with a bitter awareness of a deplorable human condition and in

¹⁸ Czesław Miłosz, *Collected and Last Poems*, op. cit., 322.

¹⁹ Cf., the poem "In Depression" in Czesław Miłosz, *Collected and Last Poems* op. cit., 306.

²⁰ See "In Depression" in Czesław Miłosz *Collected and Last Poems* op. cit., 306.

the sense of a community based upon basic existential experiences. The motif of light is dominant – in its archetypal symbolic meanings, made use of and extended over ages in liturgy and sacral art.²¹

Light-related symbolism appears repeatedly in Miłosz's works. We come across its arguably most beautiful wording in the opening phrases of the prayer-poem *Jasności promieniste* ['Rays of dazzling light'] which flashes also by a rich vowel and consonant instrumentation (especially in its Polish version)²²:

Jasności promieniste,
Niebiańskie rosy czyste,
Pomagajcie każdemu
Ziemi doznającemu.

[Light off metal shaken,
Lucid dew of heaven,
Bless each and every one
To whom the earth is given.²³

The heavenly powers, called by their new name here – one that multiplies their blaze – are protective powers. A trustful prayer is said to them by those who, living on the earth, experience all the earthly things. The hope that the prayers will be answered is contained in the structure of the metaphorical images themselves: the rays radiating out of the source of light and the dews coming down from heaven, flow down toward the earth: they embrace it with their brightness and sprinkle it with refreshing drops of water.

Translate by Tristan Korecki

²¹ The art of stained glass in the Gothic era can be referred to here, along with solar symbols in Christian temples – so intensely present in the Baroque art – e.g. the 'radiant' window in the apse of St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican.

²² Published in: C. Miłosz, *To*, Wydawnictwo Znak, Kraków, 2000; English translation by Jessica Fisher & Bożena Gilewska, quoted after: *New and Collected Poems 1931-2001*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 2001 p. 745.

²³ From the volume *To (It)*, Kraków 2000. "Rays of Dazzling Light" in *Collected and Last Poems* op. cit., 252.