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LATE MASTERPIECES OF MIŁOSZ

Marek Zaleski chose a fragment from his own text for the blurb of his important book about Miłosz:

The poetic exposition [of this poet] is always *instead* of reality. [...] Miłosz wants to make his words hymn-like, he wants to praise what exists and wants to resurrect what existed. But this is only an epitaph for emotions; you cannot recall to existence what already was, nor bring justice to it.¹

Of course, we could go down to some elementary situations and ask what this “instead” means, to what extent it is against Miłosz’s important conviction about the realism of his poetry, about the power of words to make things eternal; words which Miłosz, after all, used so articulately. A bit against what Zaleski writes, Miłosz was bringing to life what was already not there and was giving justice to it. (The strongest argument here is the quality of his poetic language.)

In *Wypisy z ksiąg użytecznych* (*Excerpts from Useful Books*) Miłosz translated Paul Cezanne’s statement:

Beauty is only in truth, charm in what is true. My method, my codex [...]—is realism [...] Whatever I do, I know that a tree is a tree, a rock is a rock and a dog is a dog. This is the world’s minute which is passing. To paint it as it really is and to forget everything in order to achieve this. [...] to be an over-sensitive film, to give a picture of what we see forgetting everything about what has been seen before us.²

¹ Marek Zaleski, *Zamiast. O twórczości Czesława Miłosza*, Kraków 2005.

² Czesław Miłosz, *Wypisy z ksiąg użytecznych*, Kraków 1994, 11.

Miłosz added his own commentary to this: “If readers find in my volumes poems which fulfil this recommendation of Cezanne’s, I will be glad.” His declaration here is totally unambiguous. And probably very well known. However, what is less known is the fact that Miłosz made the conditions of this realism more specific. In “Świadectwo poezji. Sześć wykładów o dotkliwościach naszego wieku” (“Six Lectures in Verse”) he stated: “that one could be faithful to things only if they are arranged hierarchically”.³

But “arranging hierarchies” by a poet who records the reality which is passing is at the same time searching for this hierarchy in the surrounding reality, in what one is a witness of. It is not often that we see things clearly and in focus; things gradually undergo hierarchization; a poet, as time flows, requires fewer words. That was the case of Mickiewicz and his Lausanne lyrical poems.

It seems that the development of Miłosz’s poetry was somewhat analogous. Of course, even late Miłosz used extended phrases, but it seems that his short poems, of just a few lines, for example from a volume *To (It)*, are most densely soaked in the experiences of the whole of life. The weight, the importance of individual words, was bigger than in his longer poems. Similarly to late Mickiewicz and similarly to late Aleksander Wat. This feature of Wat’s poetry was described by Miłosz himself, and it seems that Miłosz was somehow specifically predestined to show it to the reading community. Anyway, the themes and pictures which appeared in Miłosz’s poetry were similar to those of Mickiewicz’s late poems (“Polały się łzy” (“I shed my tears, countless tears”), “Ach już i w rodzicielskim domu” (“Ah, Already in My Parental Home”).

For example, in the poem “Vipera Berus”:

I wanted to tell the truth
and did not succeed.
I tried confession

³ Czesław Miłosz, *Świadectwo poezji. Sześć wykładów o dotkliwościach naszego wieku*, Warszawa 1987, 72.

And I could not confess anything.
I didn't believe in psychotherapy.
I knew I would lie too much.
So I carried in myself a coiled adder of guilt.⁴

Anyway, this theme existed in Miłosz's writings from the beginning. We all remember, for example, the famous "Obłoki" ("Clouds") (from the volume *Trzy zimy* (*Three Winters*)). In the poem "Vipera Berus" the main problem is the inability to express guilt. In the volume *It* (2000) we find more picturesque references to Mickiewicz's Lausanne poems: This is the poem "Zapomnij" ("Forget"):

Forget the suffering
You caused others.
Forget the suffering
Others caused you.
The waters run and run,
Springs sparkle and are done,
You walk the earth you are forgetting⁵

Debates about the extent and kind of Mickiewicz's influence on Miłosz are still in progress. However we estimate it, it is very clear in the final phase of Miłosz's poetry, from the turn of the twentieth century. It is connected with the crystallization of his attitude to words and essentialization of his experiences.

This process is even more pronounced in the volume *Wiersze ostatnie* (*Last Poems*) (2006). It is there that the final re-evaluation of language takes place

Do not reveal what is forbidden. Keep the secret.
Since what is disclosed does people harm.
It's like in our childhood, that room that's haunted
And whose doo we mustn't open.

⁴ Czesław Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems 1931-2001*, HarperCollins, New York, 2001, 695.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 674.

And what would I have found there in my room?
 Something different then, something different now.
 Now that I am old and have been describing for so long,
 what the eyes can see.
 Until I learned that it is best
 to keep quiet.⁶

Miłosz entered the convention of settling accounts, which was the convention in which Mickiewicz's late poems were treated by poets of the twentieth century: Przyboś, Wat, Różewicz and Iwaszkiewicz.⁷ But because of the type of his relationships with Mickiewicz Miłosz embraced this convention more eagerly. What is also important here is the luggage of experience articulated during his long and creative life.

Last Poems essentialized thoughts and the search for form; they became Miłosz's final statements.

While reading this volume, one gets an impression that it is only in this volume that the programme idea started almost fifty years earlier became fulfilled: "Because poems can be written rarely and reluctantly". (*Ars Poetica*, 1968). A selection of ideas and things, higher capacity of individual words.

Mickiewicz's Lausanne themes located a protagonist, as if, "on the other side".⁸ We find such themes in Miłosz's *Last Poems*. The poetics of summarizing assumes their distillation, the opening of a new space, a step into another dimension. It happens in the poem "What Do I"

What do I or someone else
 That there will still be sunrises and sunsets [...]

⁶ Czesław Miłosz, *Selected and Last Poems, 1931-2004*, Penguin Books, London, 2014, 277.

⁷ So far this problem has been best described by Danuta Zamaćńska, *Słynne – nieznanne. Wiersze późne Mickiewicza, Słowackiego, Norwida*, Lublin 1985 (w szkicu pierwszym: *Historyk poezji wobec liryki lozańskiej Adama Mickiewicza*).

⁸ See Marian Maciejewski, *Mickiewiczowskie „czucia wieczności”*. (*Czas i przestrzeń w liryce lozańskiej*), in Idem, *Poetyka – gatunek – obraz. W kręgu poezji romantycznej*, Wrocław 1977.

We don't reply for we have no language, in which to talk with
the living.
And the flowers wilt, useless, laid when we were already far.⁹

Or, "On Salvation", the last poem in the volume expanding
the Lausanne convention:

Saved from possessions and honors,
Saved from bliss and from worry,
Saved from life and enduring,
Saved.¹⁰

He widened this convention when he—although in a slightly
flittering, yet also unambiguous way—ascertained a type of salvation;
on the level of language he introduced evangelical contexts, and if not
contexts themselves, at least their strong echo! In this way the closing
of the volume, depicting a total dispossession of the bonds of time
and space, opens a perspective of a higher order.

The 'Lausanne character' of these poems is embedded in the themes
of conscience, guilt; and they reach their climax in this fragment:

Yes, it is true, I did write an oeuvre.
It means this much, that I am fully aware
How dangerous for one's soul that can be.¹¹

This is a kind of critical point. It puts the lyric 'I' as if beyond
the immanence of art and culture of the twentieth century; it deals
with them from a higher level of eternal reality.

The poem "How Could I" deals with it in a slightly different, but
equally fundamental way, although a bit more directly, perhaps—with
a different sort of directness:

How could I how could I do such things
living in this hideous world
subject to its laws

⁹ Czesław Miłosz, *Selected and Last Poems*, op. cit., 309.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 324.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 276.

toying with its laws.
I need God so that He may forgive me
I need a God of mercy.¹²

Probably, we have not had in Polish lyrical poetry such an intensive and direct entry into the mystery of guilt and the possibilities of forgiveness, situated in the centre of the message of the New Testament and Christian theology.

In this volume this theme is explored in a large group of poems which brings to it the lofty mood of hymns. The most exquisite of these poems is “Sanctificetur”, the penultimate poem of the volume, with a huge load of expression:

What is a man without Your name on his lips?
Your name is like the first breath
and first cry of the newborn.
I utter Your name and I know You are defenceless,
since the power belongs to the Prince of this world.
You rendered things created unto the rule of necessity,
saving for yourself Man’s heart.
A man who is good, hallows Your name,
whosoever desires You, hallows Your name.
High above this earth of indifference and pain,
Your name shines resplendent.¹³

Instead of a detailed analysis of this poem as a masterpiece, let us mention some features which should be considered in such a study: a new type of hymn—the bond of a very creative attitude to poetic tradition with the most personal experience, a new attempt at writing in a lofty style, at introducing specific features of language, etc.

It is surprising that the first line, which influences the meaning of the whole poem, is unambiguously connected with “Hymn” by

¹² Ibid., 297.

¹³ Ibid., 323.

Jan Kochanowski ("Czego chcesz od nas, Panie [...] Wdzięcznym Cię tedy sercem, Panie, wyznawamy" ("What do you want from us, o Lord [...] we praise You, Lord, with hearts full of gratitude"))

As if Polish lyric poetry over the centuries has made a huge arch, and the thought of the Renaissance poet, then identical with the attitude of the lyric 'I', has reappeared again, and again has reached the point where it realizes the necessity of *praising*. This gesture—as Miłosz said—confirms our humanity.

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In *Last Poems* we also find a reflection, constantly returning in Miłosz's poetry, in all phases of his writings: the theme of poetic creativity, its sentences, nature and sense.

For example, in the poem "In Vilnius Lilacs Bloom":

Be careful, Miłosz, according to Thomas Aquinas, in what you write there should be: integritas, consonantia, claritas.¹⁴

Miłosz, recalling determinants of beauty as proposed by Thomas Aquinas, it seems, extended his understanding of realism: But he also, tackled, more directly, the problem of writing poetry in the Polish language: This statement seemed to be even more important as it was a kind of summary of Miłosz's numerous references to this problem:

Faithfully, I have served the Polish tongue.
Among many tongues, for me it stands alone.
It calls me out, it demands to be perfected,
Since it is spoken by far too many ape-men,
Towards whom, I confess, I feel a strong aversion.
But also by many beings so good and so pure.
That their prayers should change the world.
And hence the Polish language is an obligation.
And for some, a passion, I wouldn't give it up
For all the masterpieces of the wisest lands.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid., 287.

¹⁵ Ibid., 275.

In these last poems (particularly if we stress Miłosz's stubborn effort to preserve the realities of the world, this 'cleansing' and specific repetition of themes which have been present in his poetry from the beginnings) it is the valour of 'recognizing' lyrical poetry which is most important, recognizing in a confident, empirical way, if by 'empirical' we understand a type of human experience time (inner experience).

The last poems of Miłosz—or at least, many of them—entered the convention of Mickiewicz's Lausanne poetry, although, probably, the word 'enter' is not appropriate here. The highest lyrical quality of these poems is, in a way, a natural result of earlier phases of making experiences more essential, denser, which was so characteristic, for example, for Mickiewicz.

If we take into consideration Miłosz's relationships with Mickiewicz; both real (which were described, for example, by Elżbieta Kiślak in the book *Walka Jakuba z aniołem: Czesław Miłosz wobec romantyczności* (*The Fight of Jacob with an Angel: Czesław Miłosz and Romanticism*) and declared by Miłosz himself (for example in *The Land of Ulro*), and if we take into account the shape and lyrical content of his final poem, we must declare a striking analogy with the poems by Mickiewicz written during his stay in Lausanne (ascetic expression, the power of individual words, re-evaluation of the world, but at the same time a preserved sensitivity to its charms and 'tastes', but basically this openness, this window to the 'other side of supernatural reality'; a contemplative approach).

The category of 'last poems' is a clear influence of Mickiewicz's late poetics and attitude to the shape of Polish contemporary lyrical poetry (in the wide understanding of the phares) was revealed in the context of many poets of the twentieth century (among others, of Przyboś, Iwazkiewicz, Różewicz); to such an extent that the aesthetic category of the Lausanne poetry very precisely describes a certain type of attitude of a lyrical poet. I used it once to describe the brilliant late poems of Alexander Wat. Miłosz himself, while commenting on these poems in *Prywatne obowiązki* (*Private Duties*), praised their

character and focused on the 'necessity of shape' (few words, but the ones which were used were absolutely necessary). He wrote then:

How is it possible that someone writes poetry of this quality only when he is over fifty years old, and even this in short respites of relief which the illness allowed him [...]?¹⁶

[...] each of his poems was a note, hastily scribbled with the conviction that time was short [...]¹⁷

In order to have this lightness of touch, which Wat had, this gift of natural, circumstantial sketching [...], you have to experience a lot and learn a lot, and only then the most ordinary words are at your disposal.¹⁸

Maybe Josif Brodski had a similar experience, because in 1988 in Turin he said:

The more poetry one reads, the worse one bears each new case of verbosity...

Of course, Aleksander Wat's situation could not be compared with the situation of anyone else, but it points to a creative mechanism—if it could be called in this way—which could be found in Mickiewicz's ground-breaking last poems, the impact of which on the poetry in the twentieth century was so big and which is present in Czesław Miłosz's late lyric poetry; but at the same time this poetry remains absolutely original. Perhaps a formula from philosophical discourse could be adopted here (about the 'unity of philosophical experience') and we could talk about the 'unity of experience' of poets, who were, after all, so different.

¹⁶ Czesław Miłosz, *O wierszach Aleksandra Wata*, in *Prywatne obowiązki*, Paryż 1985, 62.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.