

Research Article

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Postsecular Instruments of Acculturation. Czesław Miłosz's Works from the Second American Stay

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Abstract: The article raises the question about the ways in which religious tradition can become an ally in the process of acculturation while serving the modern subject both as a springboard for innovative, creative work and as a tool of self-improvement. Czesław Miłosz's selected works from his second stay in the United States (1961-1980) are analysed from the postsecular perspective which recognises religion as a full-fledged actor in the process of modern transformations that may broaden the field of artistic choice but remains vulnerable to artistic resemantizations or even profanations (Agamben). Such an analysis allows us to interpret the poem *From the Rising of the Sun* as a form of reconciliation of Miłosz's American and Lithuanian experience (as well as of maturity and childhood, centre and periphery, modern and pre-modern cultural formation) through textual practices inspired by his private Liturgy of the Hours. In this light, the translations of the Books of the Bible on which Miłosz worked, his novel *The Mountains of Parnassus*, as well as his essays from *Visions from San Francisco Bay* emerge as instruments of shaping the communal identity with the use of pre-existing rituals, which are, nonetheless, also negotiated in the act of writing.

Keywords: modernity, postsecularism, Polish literature, migration, translation, Czesław Miłosz

Dislocations that occur between villages and cities, states, continents, languages and cultures, as well as translocations of political borders that might result in a changed citizenship despite remaining in one place: these and other forms of a more often than not compulsory migration marked the life of Czesław Miłosz. The poet was a provincial tourist and a resident, a subaltern, a refugee, an embassy worker, an outcast, a pilgrim, a guest, an academic nomad and a repatriate. The diversity of this experience and its extent over time (Miłosz lived for 93 years) implies a multiplicity of communities, to which the poet might claim his right in the process of constructing his identity.

He most frequently identified his experience as specific for the twentieth century and characteristic for the societies of the Central and Eastern Europe, pointing to his sense of belonging to the cosmopolitan circle of intellectuals in the first place and the Polish literary emigrées in the second (see: Miłosz 1968, Miłosz 2007, Miłosz 1997). These and other auto-identification gestures, however, did not mean that he welcomed becoming subordinated to pre-existing constructs, but that he was willing to work on their critical actualisation. It is exactly this attitude that stands behind the originality, the substantial interpretative potential and the influence of Miłosz's work, leading it in various creative directions that cut across linguistic and generic boundaries. An insightful reflection on this subject is provided by Ryszard Nycz, who uses a quote from Miłosz's poem *Po ziemi naszej* "Gdziekolwiek jesteś, nie zdołasz być obcy" (*Wherever you are, you cannot be a stranger*) to identify a paradigm of dealing with one's identity in the modern world, where people are "transcendentally homeless" (Nycz 1999, 41-51). Some of these literary *cum* identity-forming practices have already been analysed, especially Miłosz's translations and the writings from his first stay

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in the U.S. (1945-1950; see: Kołodziejczyk 2015, Heydel 2013). In this article, I look at a trajectory that has not been reflected upon so far, i.e. the use of the religious tradition from his source culture as the material employed by the poet in the process of acculturation.

The ability to see the importance and novelty of such practices is perceived by the post-secular thought exploring the complexity of the relationship between religion and modernity. It recognizes the legitimate presence of religion in modern societies and the important role of religious traditions and theological concepts within the project of modernity, while it explores the transformations they are subjected to, and the specificity of religious beliefs that is a consequence of these transformations (see: Taylor 2007, Habermas 2008, McClure 2007, Bielik-Robson 2009). Seen from such a perspective, Miłosz's writing reveals an affinity between philosophical and sociological inquiry and the search conducted by the poet via artistic means. It allows one to appreciate the importance of the awareness of the historical context that came to bear on his individual choices as well as recognise the unorthodox nature and hidden motivations of his poetry and its indebtedness to religious imagery. Such an interpretive viewpoint brings to the fore a series of particularly interesting effects with regard to the texts created in a cultural context which was new to Miłosz, which required a revision of his previous worldview and which eventually led him to an identity crisis. Such a scenario repeated itself in Miłosz's life on a number of occasions and made him reach for the subjectivity-shaping resources obtained in the course of his socialisation in the Lithuanian countryside. He grew up there surrounded by the still active pre-Christian folk beliefs, but also the civilising forces of the Polish manor house and later his gymnasium, with their (explosive) mix of ideas springing from the Enlightenment and the nationally oriented Catholicism. I propose to look closer at one of such moments in the life of the Nobel Prize winner that is sometimes called his second American period.

Exile

The period between the beginning of his work at the University of California at Berkeley and the moment he received the Nobel Prize for Literature (1961-1980) is described by Miłosz as a time marked by the experience of loneliness stemming from the cultural alterity of the new environment and a limited contact with his readers (Miłosz, *Słowo od autora* 2-3). He lived on the so-called Grizzly Peak, and the summit soon turned into a metaphor. It became a suitable habitat for the poet who had been a frequent visitor to the Lithuanian wilderness, who was then elevated to a professorial chair, and whose new home connoted exaltation, strength and wildness. The reverse of these associations is the isolation of someone understood neither by those at the lower rungs of the educational ladder nor by his cultured American neighbours. This particular mountainous location mobilised yet another semantic field: the view of the Pacific Ocean stretching behind the window stimulated the imagination of a migrant always on a lookout for his inaccessible homeland. This multi-layered metaphor lent its strength to Miłosz's focus on his own condition as an exiled poet, cursed by loneliness and privileged by a sense of separateness, the possibility of the encounter with the "alien" culture and an insight into his "own," attained from a potentially revelatory distance.

The conditions of migratory life were discussed by Miłosz in an essay *Notes on Exile*, published a year after the volume of poetry *From the Rising of the Sun* (1974; also referred to as *Where the Sun Rises and Where It Sets*) had come out. This commentary can be read as an expression of the views developing and maturing while he was working on the volume, which I consider crucial for his second American period. In the *Notes*, we do read that an exiled writer

gradually becomes used to the society in which he lives, and his knowledge of everyday life in the country of his origin changes from tangible to theoretical. If he continues to deal with the same problems as before, his work will lose the directness of captured experience. Therefore he must either condemn himself to sterility or undergo a total transformation. (Miłosz, *Notes* 281).

By choosing the latter, Miłosz faced the task of relating to experiences of a new kind, while retaining the memory of the old ones. The essay reveals that one of the consequences of the existential and creative strategy he adopted was the necessity of relinquishing certain literary genres (especially the realistic novel)

and undertaking others. In his opinion, exile goes hand in hand with assuming a variety of perspectives and favours genres and styles “which are related to a symbolic transposition of reality” (282).

These reflections can serve as a point of departure for a comparison between *From the Rising of the Sun* and the twenty-years-earlier *The Issa Valley*, also a text written as a response to migration, but in another cultural context (France). The novel is written from a position that is also laid out retrospectively (and retroactively) in the poem *Bypassing Rue Descartes* (1980)—by staying in the modern centre a former inhabitant of the periphery subjects his identity to a discursive test. The profanation that is committed in the novel—analogously to the sinful killing of the holy snake mentioned in the poem—is a gesture directed against the very core of pre- (or not-sufficiently) modern identity to the same extent to which it also serves as a provocation against (really dead?) God. The novel recreates the circumstances in which the peripheral identity has been born, and even though it seems to ask whether such an identity can survive a confrontation with the centre, this question is not asked directly, neither is any answer provided. Therefore, *The Issa Valley* corresponds with the model of “literature of nostalgia” described in *Notes on Exile*:

Imagination tending toward the distant region of one’s childhood is typical of a literature of nostalgia Although quite common, the literature of nostalgia is only one among many modes of coping with estrangement from one’s native land. The new point which orients space in respect to itself cannot be eliminated, i.e. one cannot abstract from one’s physical presence in a definite spot on the Earth. That is why a curious phenomenon appears: the two centres and the two spaces arranged around them interfere with each other or—and this is a happy solution—coalesce. (*Notes* 283)

In his 1974 poem, Miłosz strives to accommodate both the experiences that he considered formative for his “homeland” and those representative for his expatriate life. Even though one could point to many such experiences, I mention “both” of them, as such is the fundamental dichotomy inscribed into the text and subjected to dialectic movement in search for mediation. A prefiguration of such a movement can be deduced from the ambiguous title of the poem which provokes the question: where does the sun “rise” and where does it “set”?¹ Is it one and the same place or two different places? What is its/their status? Can the title be read as a question about situatedness of this place? “Where” is both “here” and “there,” but also everywhere and nowhere: the eponymous formula is, after all, taken from Psalm 113, where it means “the whole earth” (which—as the Polish verse goes—praises the Lord). Still, at the end of the twentieth century the same formula started signifying something else for two different reasons. The first one resulting from the Copernican revolution, which had relativized human perception of the Sun’s motion. The second connected with the lack of consensus within the global village as to which (if any) God should be praised, and whether there are any grounds for such praise at all.

An alien linguistic and cultural environment meant for Miłosz a small number of readers provided that he still wanted to write poems in his mother tongue. Not able to be heard as a voice in a public debate, his poetry became a means of coping with loneliness, a place for “self-care” (self-referential, mediated through the language of *Soi*; (see: Foucault 1988, Sendyka 2015), and a way of building a spiritual home that enabled him to find his way in a world experienced as a profoundly alien place. In this, his poetry found support in various methods created within the framework of ancient philosophy and religious traditions that aided the development of the individual spiritual sphere. A similar intuition was expressed by Jerzy Kwiatkowski, who called the four volumes of Miłosz’s poetry written at the time in question, his “great retreats” (Kwiatkowski 132). The consummate achievement of this creative strategy seems to be the volume *From the Rising of the Sun*, whose eponymous poem I discuss in more detail.

Spiritual Exercise: *From the Rising of the Sun*

The volume of poetry *From the Rising of the Sun* has already been interpreted on several different occasions, and became the subject of a study wholly devoted to it, Jolanta Dudek’s *Europejskie korzenie poezji Czesława Miłosza* [*European Roots of Miłosz’s Poetry*] (Dudek 1995; see also: Duszka 1981, Kornhauser 1981, Tischner

¹ The more literal translation of the original Polish title is *Where the Sun Rises and Where It Sets*, but Miłosz chose to quote the King James’ Bible in the English version and translated it as *From the Rising of the Sun*.

2001, Grodzki 2002). The poetic volume is called Miłosz's *opus magnum*, his most characteristic work that brings together his formal experiments of many years and the tropes most substantial from the perspective of his writing. The text was written in-between *A View of San Francisco Bay* (1969) which was an attempt at understanding the new Californian habitat and *The Land of Ulro* (1977) which was the outcome of the spiritual and intellectual work performed partly because of his academic engagements. At the same time, Miłosz started his work on the translation of the Bible into Polish and the translation of the mystical writings of his relative Oscar Miłosz into English (see: *The Noble Traveller* 1985). As he recalls in the introduction to the jubilee edition of the volume, he wrote the poem during his academic break, when he swam a lot in a pool.

The basic premise behind the assumption that physical exercise went at that time hand in hand with spiritual discipline is the construction of the poem on the framework provided by the Catholic Liturgy of the Hours. The eponymous phrase was taken from Psalm 113 (112) *Laudate pueri* performed during Vespers. In the Polish version of the title, Miłosz quotes a paraphrase of Franciszek Karpiński's rendering of Jan Kochanowski's translation and seems to cite a premature version of his own later rendering of the Psalm into Polish. Dudek suggests a possible reading of the poem as an individual vespers script, created by Miłosz to fulfil his own and his readers' spiritual needs.² The title and the structure of the poem allow for a broadened interpretation in this respect, to see the poem as an alternative form of both the elements included in the Liturgy of the Hours: lauds and vespers (performed during sunrise and sunset). One can distinguish seven basic parts of the Hours that reflect the consecutive parts of the poem: (1) a hymn, (2) an antiphon and a psalm, (3) a reading, (4) a responsory, (5) an antiphon and the Canticle of Zechariah (morning prayer) or Mary (evening prayer), (6) intercessions and (7) a prayer. Number seven ordered the whole of the Liturgy of the Hours until the 5th century (Matins, Lauds, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, Compline), but in the 6th century Prime was added to the list of the Offices by Benedict of Nursia, to be cancelled after the Second Vatican Council. In the 1970 Apostolic Constitution *Laudis Canticum* ("The Canticle of Praise") Pope Paul VI announced a new shape for the "Liturgy of sanctifying time" that Catholics were to peruse. Owing to the significance attached by Miłosz to the Second Vatican Council decrees, it seems more than justified to claim that it was a major inspiration for the poem written a few years after the Constitution had been announced.

The clean-cut structure of the poem remains in tension with its contents that are immensely diverse when looked at from a formal perspective. This mechanism is described by Ryszard Nycz in his book *Sylwy współczesne* [*Contemporary Silvae Rerum*] which treats Miłosz's poem as one of its major archetexts. Nycz underlines the importance of the coherence-inducing role of the incipit and final formulas for the texts representative for the genre of *silvae rerum*, whose definition he comes up with in his study. *Silvae rerum* are characterised by openness, formal heterogeneity, and a penchant for the poetics of the fragment (Nycz 1996, 25). A reading of *From the Rising of the Sun* as a realisation of the liturgical scenario should take into account these features. What follows below is a recognition of some of the meanings constructed by Miłosz in the poem at the interstices between religious tradition and a (post)modern literary genre.

A Polyphonic Meditation

The first of the seven parts of the poem *The Unveiling* is divided into three sequences that are written in the first person singular and two shorter ones described as the "Chorus." Despite the presence of the Chorus it is hardly possible to speak of the text as a dialogue, as it seems to resemble a dramatised monologue more. The Polish title, *Posłuchanie* [*A Hearing/ Obeisance*], suggests that the speaking subject relates what he

² Vespers and the May service are among Miłosz's major childhood memories. They seem to be of much biographical import: regular attendance in a sensually and emotionally engaging event at an early stage of socialization is baggage for life, an indelible part of identity that somatically structures an individual, but also connects him/her with a community consisting of other participants in the event. They were both an important motif, or even a "source" of his creative work (see: Miłosz 1968; Miłosz 2010, 610; Miłosz 2003, 640-642).

³ In English translation authorised by the author the title of this part is *The Unveiling* and evokes the apocalyptic, prophetic aspect of the text (see: Tischner 2001, 185).

has heard . . . or perhaps who he has obeyed? The latter sense of the Polish word *posłuchanie* reverberates in the first stanza:

I attend to matters I have been charged with in the provinces.
And I begin, though nobody can explain why and wherefore (Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems* 278).

The purpose or the addressee of that call are not clear. Neither is it known what could be the content of the text created in response, or how one can explain the fear and helplessness of the speaking subject:

This time I am frightened. Odious rhythmic speech
Which grooms itself and, of its own accord, moves on.
Even if I wanted to stop it . . . (278).

The machinery of language turns out to be yet another factor influencing the shape of the emerging poem, fashioning Miłosz, who provides the text with a name, into a Barthesian *scriptor*. The speaking I of the poem trusts neither language nor himself. His sense of power is additionally limited by strong emotions and illness:

. . . weak as I am from fever,
Because of a flu like the last one that brought mournful revelations
When, looking at the futility of my ardent years,
I heard a storm from the Pacific beating against the window.
But no, gird up your loins, pretend to be brave to the end
Because of daylight and the neighing of the red horse (278).

Physical weakness is a condition usually underlined by the authors of prophetic or mystical writings.⁴ It lends itself to a reading as a metaphor of the mediator's humility in the face of a force superior to him, a psychosomatic symptom of fear stemming from an encounter with the sacred, or as a trace of ritual practices common in possession cults such as shamanism. With the passage of time, such declarations became topoi in different traditions and that is why recalling them is the most important function of the citation. The speaking subject portrays himself as a prophet that listens to a revelation which brings only disappointment or does not occur at all: what he hears instead of an awaited voice that would carry a message making sense of his futile life, is the monotonous sound of the ocean.

The task of situating the source of the voice resonating in the poem is additionally complicated by the confusion of time and space specific for the writing "I." It becomes apparent already in the first lines of the poem:

Whatever I hold in my hand, a stylus, reed, quill or a ballpoint,
Wherever I may be, on the tiles of an atrium, in a cloister cell, in a
hall before the portrait of a king (278)

The synecdoches mobilise diverse potential states, in which the protagonist might find himself, underlining his dependence on temporal, spatial and social circumstances. They also reveal his power over them which stems from the fact that as a literate person he can choose the state he will make his reference point. For the time being he is still hesitating, but several lines later he makes his decision:

Just as I do now, under a dark-blue cloud with a glint of the red horse.
Retainers are busy, I know, in underground chambers,
Rustling rolls of parchment, preparing colored ink and sealing wax (278)

⁴ For instance, St. Theresa of Avila confesses: "I have been experiencing now for three months such great noise and weakness in my head that I've found it a hardship even to write concerning necessary business matters" (St. Theresa of Avila 1979, 33). Dudek points out that Miłosz's remark signals an affinity between this part of the poem and the *Canticle of the Sun* by St. Francis of Assisi who wrote of his own condition in a similar manner (Dudek 13).

This image is repeated in *The Unveiling* three times and serves as the most stable of the positions the subject takes, inscribing him into three fundamental contexts: the Christian present tied with the figure of the “red horse” from the Apocalypse; Miłosz’s own early apocalyptic writing, especially his volume *Trzy zimy* [*Three Winters*], when he was under the influence of Józef Czechowicz (who himself authored a prose volume *Koń rydzy*, *The Red Horse*). And finally his later work that assumes a less pronounced eschatological perspective expressed most fully in such poems as *A Song on the End of the World*, and associated further on with Swedenborg’s, Blake’s and Oskar Miłosz’s mythologies. One of the significant remarks on the subject has been included by Miłosz in a preface to his rendering of the Apocalypse in Polish:

We should accept the possibility that the Apocalypse does not tell its author the history of the present or the future, but that it transports us into another dimension, that of metahistory. It means that the sinfulness of the earthly kingdoms, feeding on the hurt and the blood of the just, is fulfilled according to one and the same historical pattern and that they are ravished because of it by the Divine Wrath. How many times is it to repeat itself, before the doomsday: that is beyond us to say (Miłosz, *Księgi biblijne* 656).

The end of the world that “is already coming” is the space of the maximum distance that one can take away from the flux of history, and simultaneously a place from which justice is done. This is the answer to the question asked by the Chorus that witnesses the protagonist’s struggle:

When will that shore appear from which at last we see
How all this came to pass and for what reason? (Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems* 279)

A threefold repetition of the archaic formula of “koń rydzy”⁵ is a spell, through which the poet broadens his field of vision both for himself and his readers. At first, it utilizes the mythological image of “retainers [that] are busy . . . in underground chambers,” as fantastical creatures that do justice and are nothing like him; through the second repetition he performs a dramatic (in both senses of the word) juxtaposition of the image of a man who thinks of his life as “futile” (the signals used in the poem allow us to identify the subject with the author; the man will come back in other parts of the poem) with a person that disciplines him into “pretending to be brave” under the threat of the same judgement; in the third one he finishes the introductory part of the poem:

Under the dark-blue cloud with a glint of the red horse
I dimly recognize all that has been.
The clothes of my name fall away and disappear.
The stars in wide waters grow smaller.
Again the other, unnamed one, speaks for me.
And he opens fading dream-like houses
So that I write here in desolation
Beyond the land and sea. (280)

When the eschatological perspective situated between Christian tradition and modern (heretic and poetic) mythology is confirmed, it makes sense of the past (otherwise it would be futile); it is a move away from the “void” of the real situation of the author towards the (still somewhat spectral) space of at-homeness; a move from a name that is a correlate of historical determinisms to a potentiality of the unnamed, a subjectivity that is emergent at the moment of writing.

What casts some light onto the last passage of *The Unveiling* are the manuscripts of Miłosz’s poems written between 1967 and 1974, and preserved in his archive in a notebook titled *Prywatne 2* (*Private 2*).⁶ This document reveals how the voices from the second and the third part of the poem emerged, which led to the creation of the person of the narrator who guides the reader through the consecutive scripts of the poem

⁵ Polish *rydzy* is an archaic word for horse coat colour used by Polish translators of the Book of Revelation; English versions of the Bible use the word “red,” and so does Miłosz in the English translation of his poem.

⁶ Beinecke Library Archive: BL GEN MSS 661, box 128, folder 2058.

as a *sylva*. Not all the voices were included in the final version of *The Unveiling* (which at first was titled *A Return*); initially, they accompanied *The Unveiling* and took the following shape:

- “Putting the preface together, not sure whether it is my own or whether it has been enforced by some orders that remain unclear to me” (manuscript, 63);
- „I hear a voice which refers to what is unrepeatable, owing to the fact that it was lived” (65);
- “The chorus breaks away, but is not necessarily a chorus of the Athenian elders draped in flowing clothes” (65);
- “Another voice of a consciousness too modern to my liking does not flatter me either” (67);
- “Again the chorus reminds me of my own entanglement” (67);
- “So at least I speak the lament on the other, but identical me” (69);
- “It turns out that it was all about forcing me into such a return” (70).

The comments above confirm that Miłosz thought of the text he was writing in terms of polyphony. The chorus merely “breaks away” from a throng of voices, among which two other are also mentioned. These voices dictate the following stanzas:

- (1) Vast lands. Flickering of hazy trains.
Children walk by an open field, all is gray beyond an Estonian village.
Royza, captain of the cavalry. Mowczan. Angry gales.
Never again will I kneel in my small country, by a river,
So that what is stone in me could be dissolved,
So that nothing would remain but my tears, tears.

- (2) It rolls along, sky-like, in the sun on its islands, in the flow of salty breezes.
It flies past and does not, new and the same.
Narrow sculptured boats, a hundred oars, on the stern a dancer
Beats baton against baton, flinging his knees.
Sonorous pagodas, beast in pearl-studded nets,
Hidden staircases of princesses, floodgates, gardens of lilies.
It rolls along, it flies by, our speech

These stanzas are symmetrical in terms of their location and length, but their correspondence is not an obvious one. Why did Miłosz describe the second stanza as an expression of “a consciousness too modern to my liking”? A possible explanation is that it contains a vision of a self-propelling “sky-like” language. It repeats itself here and in the other parts of the poem, which can be read as a signal of autoreferentiality of the textual world, unlimited by reality outside. This may be the reason for the mythical aura of the images enumerated in the second stanza, which are only loosely connected with the experience of the inhabitant of the “small country.” Things are different in the first stanza, where an analogous list (based on a similar juxtaposition) refers to what might have been the experience of the protagonist within the local context, from which he has emerged. It is in this stanza that the “I” absent from the second one appears; the “I” that is bound with the words combining Psalm 137 with the *Lausanne Lyrics* by Adam Mickiewicz. The whole is archaized and creates an impression as if it was just a couple of hackneyed phrases from the archive of cultural memory rather than concrete impressions by a single individual. Both stanzas mobilize a series of associations from diverse cultural registers that form the speaking subject out of fragments rather than allow him to speak on his own.

What follows this exceptional dialogue enclosed in the passages divided by choral parts and difficult to pinpoint in terms of a concrete subjective perspective, is the “lament of the other and yet identical me,” as the author puts it (without making that definition public). The lament consists of a series of images from a “twenty-year-old” life presented in the third person and in the present tense which soon is replaced by a reflection of another “self” in its relation to the young man, or rather the sensuous perceptions that they share. This new perspective undermines the previous image. The young man wandering around the city is replaced by a cosmic vision of human potentiality set in an eon beyond the world:

Darkly, darkly cities return.
 The roads of a twenty-year-old are littered with maple leaves
 As he walks along one acrid morning, looking through the fences at gardens
 Ad courtyards, where a black dog barks, and someone chops wood.

Now on a bridge he listens to the babble of the river, bells are resounding.
 Under the pines of sandy bluffs he hears echoes, sees white frost and fog.

How did I come to know the scent of smoke, of late autumn dahlias
 On the sloping little streets of a wooden town

Since it was so long ago, in a millennium visited in dreams
 Far from here, in a light of which I am uncertain?
 Was I there, cuddled like a vegetal baby in a seed,
 Called long before the hours, one after another, would touch me?
 Does so little remain of our labors lasting till evening
 That we have nothing left except our completed fate? (279-280)

If this passage is a lament, it should be possible to identify the death that is grieved. Without any doubt, there is an “I” that has died. A sense of connection between personas developing during consecutive stages of individual life has been lost. What is missing is the point from which one could tell the narration of the transformation of the subjectivity connecting these stages. But the story keeps unfolding, going through the stage at which the time and place are hypothesised, as those coordinates, from which the text that occurs at the same time might be uttered. In the concluding lines of *The Unveiling* the protagonist goes back to the eschatological perspective, but what resounds in his decision is both relief and resignation: “Again the other, unnamed one, speaks for me. . . . So that I write here in desolation.” The prerequisite for regaining the life in the story is for the protagonist to attain a maximum distance towards the life determined in spatial and temporal categories.

Who is “the other, unnamed one”? The text returns here to the beginning, where the protagonist has enumerated various versions of himself in which he “may be,” situating himself outside each of these versions; hence no name. Only such an unnamed figure can articulate the sense, encompass people and events within a broad field of references, and locate it within the bounds of a cosmic order. Still, his story will always remain “in the stead”: instead of what could be told by the true (?) “I”: this possibility, however, is cancelled out as unrealistic or nonsensical. The unnamed one speaks for me, so that I could write. The hypothetical “cosmic self” replaces the “real self” as the source of voice, but it is the real self that remains the source of writing. Łukasz Tischner interprets the figure of the “unnamed one” who “speaks for me” as a reference to the transcendent source of prophetic and poetic inspiration, the so-called *daimonion*, a Greek concept that Miłosz willingly used to bridle his creative ego (Tischner 2001, 190). And yet the resulting text seems to refer to a third party, somebody who emerges only through the unfolding story that becomes an arena on which the two other figures confront each other.

Jolanta Dudek claims that the “unnamed one” is JHWH, the God of Torah and Christianity; God, whose name in both these traditions has been tabooed (Dudek 29). Indeed, the perspective to which the protagonist aspires, bears the marks of an omnipotent and eternal transcendence, encompassing both the sources and the goal of creation in general and an individual life in particular. The “cosmic self” hypothesis seems to be insolubly bound with the idea of the Absolute. In an earlier passage consisting of three questions, one can sense the echoes of the Christian doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul and its predestination. The soul and the Absolute are two sides of the same coin that allows the protagonist to acquire his own individuality. This is what is at stake in Miłosz’s artistic practice, as Ryszard Nycz seems to argue in his *Contemporary Silvae Rerum*, where he claims that Miłosz came up with “his own poetic transformation of the rules of Imitatio Christi that stems from a specifically Christian version of the discovery of immanence in the mystery of the Incarnation” (Nycz 1996, 56). Nycz elaborates on this point further:

The divergent movement of this “intellectual poem”: the evocation and the prophecy, memory supported by imagination and hope sustained by faith, develops here according to the rules of being (rather than the norms of language, genre or other compositional patterns) that are deciphered by Miłosz . . . according to the renewed method of the Christian *Imitatio*. Within the reversed perspective of a meditational soliloquy, the whole of individual history is reconciled with the universal dimensions of temporality (mythical, historical, eschatological) and shaped like a “single simultaneity:” an unveiling sense, a fulfilled biography, a poem that represents (Nycz 1996, 70-71).

This two-directional movement of an existential examination of conscience remains in accord with what Miłosz has learned from Jeanne Hersch: “That in our lives we should not succumb to despair because of our errors and our sins, for the past is never closed down and receives the meaning we give it by our subsequent acts” (Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems* 712). In a later conversation with Rachel Berghash Miłosz agrees that his conscience is “future-oriented,” and alludes to Hersch again:

There was a time in my life when I went through a very difficult period of constant retrospective thinking about my shortcomings, my sins and misdeeds in the past. A friend of mine, a follower of existentialist philosophy, told me that I practised what in the Middle Ages was called *delectatio morosa*, a term used to describe the way in which monks used to think about their past misdeeds and sins, meditating on them for days instead of doing what was necessary at the present. She said that our past is not static and that it constantly changes according to our deeds at the present. The things that we do at the present throw a light backwards upon our previous shortcomings and deeds; every act of ours presently performed transforms the past. If we make use of them as motoric force, for instance, that pushes us to do good things, we redeem our past and give a new meaning and a new sense to our past actions. (Miłosz, *Conversations* 77).

For Miłosz the “deed at the present” that had an exceptionally strong potential of retroactive redemption was literature. In *The Unveiling* “futility of . . . ardent years,” the fragmentary character of experience, the inertia of language and the limitation of time- and space-bound perspective are all overcome by means borrowed from religious tradition and transformed in order to respond to the novelty of the cultural experience that has become the lot of the poet.

As a whole, *The Unveiling* is a dramatic staging, through which the protagonist is drawn into a liminal situation, understood as a dissipation of the basic—if not all—elements of identity. In other words, one could say that the one to set the stage for this situation is the author of the poem as he hopes to redeem his past by constructing his new better “self” in the created text. To a certain extent, a similar gesture was performed by Adam Mickiewicz in his *Visitation* and Bolesław Leśmian in his *Prologue* to the cycle *Z księgi przeczuć* [*From the Book of Premonitions*]. Magdalena Saganiak analyses the former as a meditation:

[Its beginning] leads to a loosening or a destruction of the cognitive categories used so far and gives rise to a desire for new categories that would be more in line with the new attitude When a meditation begins in such conditions, it can lead to the rejection of the old language and a search for new categories. What is privileged is the state in which the hitherto used language leads to an aporia or refuses to explain observable phenomena (Saganiak 164-165).

From this standpoint a meditational text follows a pattern resembling subsequent stages of a ritual: the phase of exclusion, during which the authorial and narrative subjectivity becomes destabilized through the paradoxical, aporetic discursive movement; a liminal phase, i.e. the period of space-time travel undertaken by the fragmented subject (a symbolic expression of such a state is the fragmentary and polyphonic nature of the text); and the phase of reintegration on a higher level of self-consciousness, as evidenced by new discursive elements enriching the linguistic and cognitive competences of the subject as the speaking I, the author and the reader.

The protagonist assumes identities connected with different times and spaces; he practices self-awareness and strengthens the constantly undermined foundations of his own spirit while assessing and choosing the paths to follow. This identity is central to the text; it carries out the “polyphonic soliloquy” inherent to the poem, which consists of both the narrator and the characters. It is this identity that does the work of “breaking” and “erecting” the spiritual building. The artistic power of the text is generated, I believe, on the tension line between the references to the formal practice of the Liturgy of the Hours and the openness and polyvocality of the individual passages.

The Alchemy of Memory

A meditation on one's own subjectivity is present in the second part of the poetic volume, entitled *Diary of a Naturalist*, which gives voice to a reconciliation of the experiences situated by the protagonist as the "here" and "there." The Polish version starts with a gloss from the narrator, and the gloss begins as follows: "I would like to stay within idylls and fairy tales, but that is impossible, not that I am so concerned about the drop in the numbers of condors in the Sierra Nevada." What is the reason for this question? Instead of an answer we do get two parallel poetic fragments, accompanied by a refrain: "Fare well, Nature / Fare well, Nature." Both are uttered from the perspective of a certain "us" and consist of three regular stanzas. The first describes the stages of walking through a forest, a trip that begins at dawn and ends in the evening. What is invoked here are fairy tale motifs (four-leaf clover, double hazelnut, living water, fortune-telling) and animistic images of nature ("the oak our father," "sister birch," "the king of beavers"). The mythical aura of the tale is strengthened by a set of traditional epithets (a deep forest, great life, dense black forest, long day, clear water). The attitude of the travellers towards the world they enter is characterized by the virtues Miłosz defined in *The World (A Naive Poem)* for a reality independent of human perception and an expectation of the fulfilled promise of the "great life" given by that world; *belief* in the goodness of the natural course of things and ultimate destinies; finally, *love* that puts man on equal terms with the rest of the creation and enables a sense of harmonious unity with the world. This short passage may be regarded as a mythical miniature condensing the images characteristic for the pre-modern mentality and traditional religiosity, whose living presence Miłosz willingly emphasised in the cultural environment domineering his childhood.

The second of the passages lacks narrative coherence. Each of the stanzas is a separate image of a confrontational encounter of the human "we" with another animal species, during which it is the human element that dictates the rules. A plane crosses the airspace, leading to a death of a condor; a bear appears in the park and is given beer by people who consider themselves the owners of this culturally defined space; a cougar crossing the road is classified by the car passengers as a natural element owing to the statistical data they know. Short, ironic dialogues highlight the sense of estrangement between human beings and other species that are incapable of conversation. Man usurps the right to decide the fate of other animals as a part of a higher metaphysical order (as he did "eat from the Tree of Knowledge"), both as a ruler of the transformed territories and as a rational being that can simplify other organisms and categorise them as measurable resources.

When coupled with the information from the first gloss, the names of the places and the animal species allow one to identify the imagined setting as "America." It remains in a stark opposition with "Lithuania" which has been portrayed in the first part of the poetic volume. The construction of the whole builds a contrast between the sense of unity with nature and the respectful reverence for it experienced in the space of the "homeland," and the separation of man from nature and his sovereign attitude towards it in the space of "exile." This is not a hierarchizing juxtaposition that would valorise one experience as better, more intense or more legitimate than the other. Both these modalities of human relations with nature become rejected. Staying within the space of "idylls and fairy tales" is impossible after the American experience. An appropriation of the rational model, based on the separation of man from nature and violence against it, is in turn precluded by the formative experience of childhood.

The passage that follows is marked by formal irregularity correspondent with the amalgamation of the previously separated temporal, spatial and biographical realities. Miłosz uses in it a poetic form which was being discovered at the time and which brought together the avant-garde version of the sentence poem and the biblical verse, transforming them (while giving way to another voice) into a syntagmatic stream arbitrarily forced into a poetic form. With this passage, we re-enter the domain of polyphonic psychomachia already familiar from *The Unveiling*. First, voice assumes the position of the authorial "I": "I show here how my childish dream was denied" (Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems* 282). The narrative continues in the present tense, even though we move to a classroom decades later and hundreds of thousands of miles away. It is in this classroom that the young protagonist, on "[his] school bench but not present," stares at the map *Animals of North America*, taking an imaginary leap into another world, as friendly as the Lithuanian one.

Moments later, this distant world invades the familiar space of the classroom, demanding a response. There is a two-way movement of reciprocal illumination between the past and the present, a youthful interaction with imagined nature and a confrontation with it in adulthood.

But I will be called to the blackboard, and who can guess when, in what years.
The chalk breaks in my fingers, I turn around and hear a voice, mine, probably mine: (282)

Miłosz engages into a textual dialogue between his old and new self, between his Lithuanian and American “I,” trying to take both perspectives into consideration and accommodate the differences between them. The relationship between childhood and adulthood is superimposed onto the relationship between the centre and the periphery, as well as the enchanted and disenchanted world. However, the protagonist is unwilling to unequivocally condemn, reject, or shame the first of these oppositions, and he accordingly softens the contrast between them, looking for the “middle way.” What is said by the voice that is “unveiled” here? The passage inserted into the inverted commas explains the initial tale of the communal exploration of nature in a completely different language:

“White as horse skulls in the desert, black as a trail of interplanetary night
Nakedness, nothing more, a cloudless picture of Motion.
It was Eros who plaited garlands of fruit and flowers,
Who poured dense gold from a pitcher into sunrises and sunsets.
He and no one else led us into flagrant landscapes
Of branches hanging low by streams, of gentle hills,
And an echo lured us on and on, a cuckoo promised
A place, deep in a thicket, where there is no longing.
Our eyes were touched: instead of decay, the green,
The cinnabar of a tiger lily, the bitter blue of a gentian,
Furriness of bark in half-shade, a marten flickered,
Yes, only delight, Eros. Should we then trust
The alchemy of blood, marry forever the childish earth of illusion?
Or bear a naked light without color, without speech,
That demands nothing from us and calls us nowhere?”
I covered my face with my hands and those sitting on the benches kept silent.
They were unknown to me, for my age was over and my generation lost (282-283).

Instead of a linear narrative about a day beginning at dawn and finishing in the evening, we get an image taking a cosmic perspective and gradually descending from “an interplanetary night” towards the earthly “sunrises and sunsets” (which means that what is referred to here are cyclic practices rather than a single trip), through “fragrant landscapes” to colours of flowers and movements of animals hidden in a thicket. Just as in the previous passage, the image is permeated by the atmosphere of human trust and respect towards nature, but this time its point of reference is a transcendent and mysterious sovereign: Nakedness / Motion / Eros / delight. The interpretation of this figure requires a reference to the mythological system of Oscar Miłosz because the notions used in the poem are derived from his philosophy (just like “the alchemy of blood”). “Liquid gold” poured from the metaphorical pitcher imbues the material world with its delightful qualities and is an echo of the myth of creation by transmutation of the non-physical into the physical light, i.e. a religious interpretation of the theory of big bang formulated by Oskar Miłosz (see: Miłosz, *The Land of Ulro*). Since the moment the metaphysical light was materialized and put into creative motion, it has become the foundation of the relative time and space, but also a guarantee of the meaningfulness of human actions, an erotic, amorous drive. Following that drive (facilitated by listening to the rhythm of one’s own blood) allows a man to inscribe his own life into the framework of creation as something good, a part of the divine plan.

The passage ends with an expression of helplessness, a suspended question about the choice between a belief in the possibility of re-entering natural life on non-traditional, but still metaphysical grounds, and an acceptance of the exclusively physical mode of existence. It is followed by another gloss which leads us beyond the school bench while introducing a previously abandoned thought:

My generation was lost. Cities too. And nations.
 But all this a little later. . . . That boy, does he already suspect
 That beauty is always elsewhere and always delusive? . . .
 He sees what I see even now. Oh but he was clever,
 Attentive, as if things were instantly changed by memory.
 Riding in a cart, he looked back to retain as much as possible.
 Which means he knew what was needed for some ultimate moment
 When he would compose from fragments a world perfect at last (284).

The solution to the dilemma of the protagonist, who desires to accommodate his own experience of the world “there and then” with the “here and now,” is based on the activity of the subject and his transformative glance, i.e. the work of his perception that onto the image of the world saved in memory projects the knowledge of the past which allows one to make sense of that world through a series of textual transformations.

Rituals: Towards Community

The above sketch inspired by practices used for constructing a spiritual fortress should be supplemented by a commentary on the role of communal ritual in Miłosz’s writings during the second American “exile.” Interest in the ritual is present throughout Miłosz’s work—from his debut *Kompozycje* [*Compositions*, 1930], through *Ksiądz Seweryn* [*Fr. Seweryn*] or *W Krakowie* [*In Krakow*] from the last volume published when he was still alive (2002). During the time discussed in this study, however, this interest clearly increases, not only because of the existential situation laid out above, but also because of two historical circumstances: the Second Vatican Council which ended in 1965 and the birth of the American counter culture, with Berkeley as one of its most important centres. These two occurrences lead Miłosz in two directions. He reacts to the reform of the Catholic liturgy with a creative outburst, translating together with Fr. Józef Sadzik selected books of the Bible, writing essayistic passages on the topic in *Visions from San Francisco Bay* (1969) and searching for contemporary liturgical form. Inspired by the eclectic practices of the local counter-culture, he also proposes his own script of “the mass of the catechumens” in a text that—by the publisher’s decision, based on a recurring character of Efraim (Miłosz’s *porte parole*)—became a part of the unfinished science-fiction novel, *The Mountains of Parnassus* (Miłosz 2017)⁷.

When translating the Bible, Miłosz does not define himself as a philologist but as a participant and co-creator of a certain culture. This is evidenced by the paratexts accompanying the successively published books (introductions, footnotes and other commentaries), as well as by the choice of the translations that he had used in his own research and the extent to which he relied on them, despite the knowledge of the languages in which the original had been written: he relied on the Greek or Hebrew text to a lesser extent than on the existing translations. His translation manuscripts very rarely contain notes on Hebrew root words and are more often filled with quotations from the existing Polish translations. Such small weight attributed to the original suggests that Miłosz did not have excessive reverence for his source, and saw the importance of the Bible in its cultural role more than in the fact that it could be the word of God, the Revelation. The process of translation would, therefore, mean for Miłosz a dialogue with the tradition, a form of participation in the community and an exercise in finding his own language, in which he could respond to the legacy of the religious worldview. He identified himself with the tolerant Poland of many cultures, and not with the Catholic national tradition that he often discussed with much dislike, expressing an awareness of its destructive history. If he was a Christian, his Christianity was of a cosmopolitan and heretic nature in Peter Berger’s sense of the word (see: Berger 1980), but also literally, pointing to his penchant for studying the history of heresy (see: Miłosz, *A Theological Treatise*). His attitude to the Bible is analogous: he reads it and translates it “crosswise,” engaging into a creative *agon* on an authentic, individual shape of his own religiousness, while putting forward a similar reflection to his contemporaries. The truth of language which

⁷ *Liturgia Efraima* is the only part of *The Mountains of Parnassus* published before Miłosz’s death (*Liturgia Efraima*, “Kultura” 1969, nr 8-9); more: Agnieszka Kosińska. *Prorok Nowego Świata* [*Prophet of the New World*], in: Miłosz 2012, 125.

he struggles to express, occurs in a relation: it is not something given that would already exist in a “final” form in the original.

The Mountains of Parnassus shows that America interested Miłosz as a site, in which the processes taking place in Europe become more radical—the Enlightenment project unfolded there in a form unrestricted by the historical context from which it had emerged. That is why in his novelistic phantasia, he extrapolates his observations on the subject and tries to imagine a time in which the dangerous illusion of modernity can be overcome. As we read in the *Visions*:

I am only asking myself what I have learnt in America, and what I value in that experience. I can boil it all down to three sets of pros and cons: for the so-called average man, against the arrogance of intellectuals; for the Biblical tradition, against the search for individual or collective nirvana; for science and technology, against dreams of primeval innocence. (Miłosz, *Visions* 218)

The Mountains of Parnassus also operates with a recourse to these three pairs of alternatives. The choice of the Biblical tradition against the “quest for nirvana” decides the form of *The Mass of the Catechumens*. The ritual script is modelled on the Catholic Mass, primarily on the Liturgy of the Word. There is no Liturgy of the Eucharist, however, and the rite is performed by the deacon rather than by the priest. In addition to the lessons (reading from the Old Testament), the gospel and the sermons, the script includes equivalents of both the introductory and concluding rites, the reverencing of the altar and the penitential rite. However, it is a proposal of mutually affirmed common faith in a text that we all know is contractual, even though we trust the solemn character of such a contract.

Even though reason and autonomy belong to the pantheon of modern values, ritual as an identity-shaping practice falls within the scope of interest of the post-secular thought as it “does no struggle with modernity, but thinks of itself as its most faithful ally . . . while defending the Enlightenment from itself, it reminds it of its true stakes” (Bielik-Robson, *Powrót mesjańskiej obietnicy* 350). Agata Bielik-Robson, who has authored this definition, proposed in another of her studies, *Inna nowoczesność [Other Modernity]*, a move away from the idea of freedom understood as a negation of all preconditions. In its stead, she called attention to the Enlightenment idea of maturity which demands conscious dependence that in its own turn becomes the subject of labour and critical reflection of the individual. In this context, ritual becomes a potentially creative site of working through the dependence on the community and its truths and values while it remains a “celebration of the bonds with what is larger than the individual, ties with a certain whole into which s/he is entangled” (Bielik-Robson, *Inna nowoczesność* 49).

Miłosz’s attitude towards ritual is symptomatic for the model of mature subjectivity development through “work on dependence” discussed by Bielik-Robson. His intuitions were akin to these of contemporary anthropologists: he realised that through biological and cognitive mechanisms ritual imprints on our bodies a sense of meaningfulness, allowing for an experience of superindividual dimension while it creates it at the same time (see: Turner 1969, Rappaport 1999, Lex 1876, Assman 2011). Initially, both these irrational mechanisms as well as the community to which he was supposed to belong due to the process of socialisation, aroused his dislike, but gradually he started working on his identity in the context of these dependencies. This work intensified during the years spent in California, as he had reasons to believe that it was his last stop on the twisting path of a modern nomad which has befallen him.

Conclusions

During the period discussed in this article, Miłosz created textual strategies of coping with the migratory situation. These strategies made use of religious traditions as a repertoire of spiritual practices allowing him to build his “inner fortress” on the one hand, and on the other were a source of ritual scenarios that served him as tools for creating a community. Both these centripetal and centrifugal actions were employed by Miłosz during an identity crisis that was unavoidably bound with his plunge into a new linguistic and cultural environment. Miłosz’s works can then be read as an example of a modern approach to the tradition of ritual exercises and readymade scenarios that demands a confrontation with the limitations to

the freedom of the subject who employs them. At the same time, it opens otherwise inaccessible spiritual spaces as it presents a spectrum of traditions and forms, additionally broadened by the creative medium of literature.

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