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# Women in the Poetry of Czesław Miłosz.

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### Women in the Poetry of Czesław Miłosz

As a critic, Czesław Miłosz has shown remarkable openness to feminism. Contrary to the beliefs popular in the literary circles, he embraced the poetry of Anna Świrszczyńska and talking about her experience of corporeality used different criteria of value than the ones presented in *The Land of Urlo*. He also discussed Świrszczyńska's poetry in his lectures collected in *The Witness of Poetry* and his short essay about her life and work, "W stronę kobiet," [Toward Women] opened the 1993 feminist issue of *Teksty Drugie*. It was, perhaps, the strong presence of feminism at American universities that contributed to Miłosz's particular sensitivity to subjects often unspoken of, or even openly neglected. Miłosz regards with suspicion Mickiewicz's presentations of Telimena, convinced that the ridiculousness of the character hides a large dose of male hypocrisy.

He also views himself with suspicion. In "A Short Digression on Woman as a Representative of Nature" from *Visions from San Francisco Bay*, the poet speaks against "old-fashioned anti-feminism" of the turn of the century. He associates it with a period of adolescence and a particular kind of wound that needs to be healed by the adult. Resentment towards gender remains, however, deeply rooted in the individual psyche and in culture.

It is the same resentment that resurfaces in Miłosz's work, despite his interest in feminism which in itself is rather superficial (as he does not exhibit familiarity with feminist readings) and frequently ironic. *Provinces* contains a poem titled "One" [Them] dedicated to "feminists."<sup>1</sup> Its tone is polemical, or perhaps ironic. The poem presents characters of

<sup>1</sup> Whenever possible I provide translations of Miłosz's poems published in *New and Collected Poems: 1931-2001*. Trans. Robert Hass, Ecco: 2003. Where a canonical translation proved unavailable, I provide my own (working) translation. (AW)

passive, ordinary wives, the “caretakers of socks and pants,” patiently suffering the “grand ideas” and “faith in the genius.” While feminists tend to perceive such women as victims of violence unaware of their patriarchal dependency, the poet suggests something different: they exhibit passive resistance and know more about life than one might think.

In the work of Czesław Miłosz, images of women and love are inscribed into a double optic: different values are associated with women as part of a love relationship and different with women in general, seen only fleetingly or recalled as imaginary characters, a creation of the mind. Both the former and the latter are, first and foremost, phantasms of the poet’s mind. Those constituting part of a love relationship are viewed in positive terms. His attitude to the latter, i.e. to his own projections, is often characterized by ambivalence and uncertainty regarding the real meaning and value. The purpose of my essay is to present and discuss the phantasms, or images of women born in the poets’ mind – with the exception of the figures of mother and wife. Mother is a powerful archetype, not necessarily tied directly to other images of femininity. Also the figure of the wife, appearing in the farewell poem published in *Tygodnik Powszechny*, occupies a clearly separate place, one conditioned by the biography and character of a particular individual. For my part, I am mostly interested in the poet’s imagination, in re-creating the web of meanings tied to “femininity” rather than the relation to the biographical experience.

Freud believes the experience of ambivalence to be inseparable from serious commitment. Sometimes, strong attraction is compensated with the reflex of aversion and the tormented Ego is torn between opposite poles of the same relationship. Love and hostility go hand in hand, harmoniously maintaining tension. It is repression that may be dangerous, i.e. the moment when one of the sides of the conflicts is hidden. Miłosz presents both sides in his work. His ambivalence does not have the nature of a deep, personal complex. It has also a distinctly cultural character.

### Amore sacro

From the times of *il dolce stil nuovo*, in other words, almost from the beginnings of the European culture as that which emerged after the fall of Rome to barbarism, poetry has associated holiness with resignation from fulfillment, as well as with chastity and spiritual worship. The image of love presented, for example, by Denis de Rougemont<sup>2</sup> seems to confirm that our culture perpetuates the ambivalence of “lowly” sex and “high” feeling inscribed in the social scenarios of the experience of love.

In Miłosz’s work, love often appears in its sexual dimension and only there it is accompanied by the sacral aspect. Miłosz does not write traditional love verse: he never composed a poem expressing love nor a lover’s confession, a classical erotic or a farewell

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<sup>2</sup> *Love in the Western World*. Trans. to Polish by L. Eustachiewicz. Warszawa: 1968, 1999. See also classical texts on love by: K. Starczewska. *Wzory miłości w kulturze Zachodu*. Warszawa: 1975; J. Kristeva, *Histoires d’amour*, Paryż: 1983; O. Paz. *The Double Flame: Love and Eroticism*. Trans. to Polish by P. Fornelski, Kraków: 1996; R. Barthes. *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*. Trans. to Polish by M. Bińczyk. Warszawa: 1999.

poem; he never wrote about longing for an absent or lost beloved. Nor did he ever try to embody the Romantic lover, or Tristan or Don Juan. In fact, it seems that Miłosz was highly influenced by the Western sexual revolution: his interest in the subject was clearly greatest in the 60s, although he had approached the issue already several times before. His is, thus, a vision of liberated love and joyful sex.

Further, Miłosz's poetry does not have the function of "attracting" the beloved: there is no foreplay in it, no overcoming of resistance, and in general, the history of love itself is absent. What is recurrent is the memory of sex. "She" bears different names and, from the very beginning, their literary character indicates that the names are, in fact, pseudonyms, such as for instance in "Annalena." "I liked your velvet yoni, Annalena" – Jan Kott believes this particular verse to be one of the boldest recollections of eros in Polish poetry.<sup>3</sup> The past, despite its indelible intensity of experience, somewhat neutralizes the boldness of Miłosz's expression: "I liked" says the speaker of the poem, instead of "like." Telling stories from the past is one of the principles governing Miłosz's erotic imagery.

However, one will not find nostalgic reminiscences of loss in his work, but rather, a repeated discovery of the same moment, even if it happened a long time ago, in the distant youth in Vilnius, as for instance in "Example." Miłosz's erotic memories do not grow old, or become vague – exempt from the universal law of aging, they retain their intensity. Time exerts no destructive influence upon them, as they belong, from the onset, to a different order of reality, they are a reflection of a better existence.

Descriptions of such moments do not have to be based on personal memories, those are often intentionally blurred. Sometimes the poet creates a man and woman from scratch but the distance between him and the introduced characters does not lessen the intensity of the experience.

"The Garden of Earthly Delights: Paradise"

I am these two, twofold. I ate from the Tree  
Of Knowledge. I was expelled by the archangel's sword.  
At night I sensed her pulse. Her mortality.  
And we have searched for the real place ever since.

(403-404)

Perspective changes quickly in this short passage: from a divine gaze embracing the couple to the experience of man who achieves unity with woman, and finds a sense of existential truth. The lovers are surrounded by the memory of Paradise and carnal love brings understanding of one's own and the partner's fate as human beings.

<sup>3</sup> Kott, J. "Objęcie ziemi." *Poznawanie Miłosza 2. Część pierwsza*. Fiut, A. (ed.) Kraków: 2000. 124. "Womanhood is referred to with a Sanskrit word from *Kamasutra* in this bold recollection of eros, one of the boldest in Polish poetry. There is a dark 'o' in the sacral *yoni*, similar to the one in Polish 'noc' [night] and 'dno' [bottom]." The name of Annalena appears in the novel by Oskar Miłosz, where it is given to the sensual protagonist, Clarissa Annalena.

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It is difficult to identify “her” in Miłosz’s work. She is not branded by separateness or otherness. Several different persons hide behind the names but there is only one woman, universal and mythical. Man transcends his “self.” Man and woman become one. Their fate is shared and so is the utopia of “the real place.” Even lovers themselves feel it approach. Jan Kott notes that what they experience is a renewed sense of *arche*. Similarly, elsewhere:

“After Paradise”

How perfect  
All things are. Now, for the two of you  
Waking up in a royal bed by a garret window.  
For a man and a woman. For one plant divided  
Into masculine and feminine which longed for each other.  
Yes, this is my gift to you. Above ashes  
On a bitter, bitter earth.

(407)

Complementing each other, femininity and masculinity create one whole. This particular myth shares the most with the hermeneutic tradition and the context of Plato’s androgyne is also strongly pronounced.<sup>4</sup> But cultural references are not of key importance here, it is the intensity of sensation that comes to the fore. In moments like that, physical experiences become spiritual the division between the physical and the spiritual is abolished in “the real place”. A new dimension reveals itself.

This type of sexual relationship is free from the sense of sin. In *The Issa Valley*, moments spent with Onuté appear so distinctive that they are taken out of daily life, subject to moral assessment and judgments. They are separate from reality

And this is how It was performed: Onuté would lie flat on her back, pull him toward her, and squeeze him with her knees. And they stayed that way, as the sun rolled across the sky, and he knew that all the time she was waiting, waiting for him to touch her, and it made him feel *sweet* all over. Yet this was not just any girl, but Onuté, and nothing could have prevailed on him to confess their secret. (44-45)

The passage quoted above is followed in the book by the description of a sense of lightness that Thomas experiences after taking Communion. The boy feels privileged and ready to receive the Guest knowing that only by becoming one flesh and being seized by Sacrum can the highest level of the sublime be reached. These two neighboring pas-

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<sup>4</sup> Those motifs were interpreted and discussed already by Aleksander Fiut in *Moment wieczny. O poezji Czesława Miłosza*, in the chapter “We władzy Erosa” (the “Androgyne” part.) I do not discuss their potential development in my essay, as I do not discuss others that had been already commented on by Fiut (wherever I agree with him.) My essay in its current form is greatly indebted to Fiut and the discussions held during the Miłosz session, despite the fact that shared conclusions were not reached at the time. Regardless, they helped me greatly to formulate in a more precise manner several issues that had apparently previously been unclear.

sages could be possible interpreted as an analogy, not yet expressed fully. But in Miłosz's introduction to his translation of "Song of Songs," one finds not an analogy between but an identification of sacrum and love:

I think the Song touches upon the greatest mystery, analogy between sexual union of man and woman and the relationship of man with God. A statement like this might sound strange to our ear, but religious poetry, whether in India or – to chose a nearer place – of the Spanish mystics, assumes this truth to be self-evident. The Song has bound those two loves together earlier than the Greek philosophy that ascribed to Eros the role of the initiator. (26)

Ecstatic moments have a cleansing power, they are a reflection of the "other existence," an overcoming of *principium individuationis* and its renewal at the same time. The "self" loses nothing but instead opens up, participating in an ecstatic, pure and original symbiotic unity. In his classical essay "Epifanie Miłosza," [Miłosz's epiphanies] Jan Błoński notes that "erotic current often appears in [Miłosz's] epiphanies and raw sexuality often comes to the surface of the poem (for example, in 'Ode To A Bird')"<sup>5</sup> Eros stands for energy – sexual, sacral and poetic.

The transition between the everyday and that extraordinary moment is a mystery not to be explained. What rituals should be performed to experience It? Nobody knows. There is no *ars amandi*, no rite, the boundary between the sacred and the profane cannot be crossed with the help of known techniques. And the participants of the experience are equally puzzling. Onutė from *The Issa Valley* is not clearly outlined as a character, she is given only a few attributes and a genealogy, has no personality, does not push forward the plot of the novel that in itself is somewhat enigmatic. Women in the quoted poems are not real people but transformed participants of the joint festivity of existence. Irena, from "Example" (from *It*) is not an exception either, she is a concrete person but an extraordinary one. Age and experience cleansed her from lowly feelings and irrational emotions of the world. She has become a model of Stoic wisdom.

## Femininity and fetishes

All women of this earth are different. And they are a multitude, to the point when they are even viewed as a colorful, diverse crowd. In *The Separate Notebooks*, Miłosz writes: "A dark Academy. Assembled are instructress in corsets, grammarians of petticoats, poets of unmentionables with lace. The curriculum includes feeling the touch of silk against the skin, listening to the rustles of a dress, raising the chin when the aigrette on the hat sways." (375) In the passage above, attributes of femininity appear with more clarity than actual persons who are not even there, there are only petticoats, eyelashes, falling straps. Their purpose is clear – they are signs that attract men. Filina, a lady of rather loose morals, sings:

<sup>5</sup> After: Błoński, J. *Miłosz jak świat*. Kraków: 1998. 60. See: Błoński, J. "Epifanie Miłosza." *Poznanwanie Miłosza*. Kwiatkowski, J. (ed.) Kraków: 1985. 205-206.

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*My shoes are made of a mouse's cunt  
And so are the gloves I got from my aunt*

(347)

Freud interprets shoes and gloves as symbols of female sex. Miłosz mentions also “frou-frou skirts” and “undergarments not very clean” – those are the signs of Filina in a poem about her. Those are her synecdoches, just as her walking before the mirror, her admiring of her own reflection, her waiting for the carriage. Portraying the woman through the cultural attributes of fashion and symbols of elegance is a recurrent way of looking at the “her” in Miłosz’s poetry, her presence almost entirely made of cultural signs that signify attributes of gender. The most external attributes, too, ones that transmit the signal of readiness to the opposite sex. The woman lures the man with her special signs (her metonymies) which are fashion dependant and change with time.

Miłosz reaches here for firmly established imagery of female sexuality but those stereotypes are not solely used by men. In Pawlikowska-Jaskorzewska, the phantasms of femininity are very similar: the woman is largely made of fans, furs, seductive looks. Miłosz’s “The Hooks Of A Corset” from *Unattainable Earth* contains a long quotation from Janina Puttkamer Żółkowska’s memoir *Inne czasy, inni ludzie* [Different Times, Different People] (with a complete bibliographical note), describing Aunt Isia who wore Viennese dresses, modest but rustling and sensual, and was fond of the artifice Yong Poland’s poetic style (“white peacocks”). Using such signs, the woman can view herself as attractive and Miłosz admires Filina standing alone in front of the mirror. He embraces her coquetry, her autoeroticism.

A Freudian scholar is likely to interpret reception of femininity through its attributes as fetishism grounded in equipping the woman with substitute objects compensating the absence of penis. This would also imply – in a Freudian reading – a symbolic masculinization of woman. Such an interpretation raises obvious objections until we realize that it is only a metaphor revealing not a diagnosis of a deviation but a recognition of a universal mechanism regulating communication in the sphere of sexuality. A Lacanian scholar would phrase it in a more complex manner, upholding the recognition of fetishism as a phallic strategy that is a constant element of sexual relation of woman and man the triggering of which depends on the reading of the signs of coquetry used (often unconsciously) by the woman that for the man constitute a promise. Paweł Dybel comments: “Only then can a spark fly between the woman and the man, only then can the desire of the subject commence.”<sup>6</sup> There is one more philosophical conclusion of even greater significance here, a conclusion to be discovered once resistance to psychoanalytical terminology has been overcome. The relationship in question takes place in the field that Lacan that refers to as *objet petit a* and concerns certain phantasms that do not encompass the entire female identity, indeed, they are simply a reflection of the male imagination. Thus, one should not expect a relation of that kind to disclose any

<sup>6</sup> Dybel, P. “Refleksje wokół diagramu różnicy seksualnej Jacques’a Lacana.” *Krytyka feministyczna. Siostra teorii i historii literatury*. Borkowska, G. and Sikorska L. (eds.) Warszawa: 2000. 37.

“truth,” lead to a deep understanding or reveal two separate identities to each other. This relation simply does not contain a “real space.”

The moral framing is of importance as well. Revealing the strategy of eroticization, Miłosz ignores firmly established and culturally ambiguous moral judgments of the mechanisms surrounding female beauty. In the Polish tradition, in the moral code of the upper classes, and in literature of morality “primping and preening” is viewed as an expression of vanity (as proclaimed by the Catholic moral norm) that results in corruption (although, admittedly, it is difficult to establish a relation without coquetry). This is why, upon seeing Telimena subtly “enhancing” her beauty, Tadeusz panics: “Dear God, rouged!” The mirror reflects the devil. A woman applying rouge and lipstick in front of the mirror ought to feel shame. Zosia, unlike Telimena, is an “innocent beauty,” a woman that is coquettish, but unknowingly.

In Miłosz work, “primping and preening” is viewed in positive terms. In one of the late poems, “Voyeur” (*This*), “panties with lace” become one of the major arguments for the fact the world is a place to be admired. The male subject in Miłosz does not change with age, remaining a young man. Femininity attracts him luring primarily his gaze – every textbook of human sexuality confirms that men are more sensitive to visual stimuli than women, while feminist writers suggest that the gaze (resulting in objectification) is an element of the patriarchal strategy. What the vision of femininity contains is simply a male phantasm where elements of dress are an erotic signal, an encouragement and a promise of a chance to enter a relationship with the man who looks. A contemplation of corsetry details is a sign of erotic potential.

Here as well, as in Miłosz’s erotic-epiphany poems, contemplation is tied mostly to the past, not just personal past but, primarily, the imaginary and distant one. Moments in question are always drawn from sensual imagination of the subject, sometimes with the help of additional medium, such as a painting, in other words, the painter’s vision. This is also how the Venetian courtesans teasing a peacock make their appearance, through a reference to a painting by Carpaccio’s (I am not discussing this theme in more depth, as it has been exhausted by A. Fit). Several other visions of women in *This* are ekphrastic, as noted by Jan Błoński in his essay from *Tygodnik Powszechny*, where Błoński attributes to Miłosz an intention to create a catalogue of typical female roles. This, however, seems not to be the case, as none of the women is a mother, for instance.

Art is an important intermediary for Miłosz. A painting offers the potential of distance and style: distance is a prerequisite for aesthetic perception and style refers us to a particular point in time when the painting was conceived, enriching the vision with distinct features of a past historical moment and, as the result, enhancing distance even further. And so Klimt’s Judith becomes a goddess of those dying in the trenches of the Great War, seen as a poisoned embodiment of the dying monarchy while her splendor heralds decline. Similarly, Edward Hopper’s woman in a red petticoat is not as much herself, as an arbitrary quintessence of career-drive, fast travel and American way of life. Believed to be a precursor of pop-art, Hopper painted bar interiors and hotel rooms, placing in them lonely figures with empty eyes. Miłosz describes the woman from Hopper’s painting as a “businesswoman,” while Błoński adds that she is “devoid of her femininity:



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devoid of her calling, doomed to a salesman fate.” She does retain the typically feminine set of luring signs: her petticoat is red and her hair – flawless. Except, she does not ask existential questions, instead, she is unconsciously carried by the fast current of life. The latter is as disturbing as the sexually provocative formula of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: discard the unnecessary, it is mass culture and money that make the world go round.

Filina (with her Goethean pedigree) also belongs to the past and finds company among other Miłosz’s women, for instance those from the entirely non-Villonian “Skarga dam minionego czasu” [Complaint of the ladies of the past]. The antiquity of the women’s dresses takes away their literalness, revealing purely human motivation behind their reverence for the attributes of fashion: a persistent fight against passing, vulnerability to time, and a desire to restore whatever is left of the past. Miłosz aestheticizes the feminine ability to make use of style. The presence of the body is just a faint, barely readable trace here. Woman is revealed as an artist of her own, capable of selecting the most ephemeral aesthetic testimony and of shaping, from this ephemeral material, her portrait reflecting the male phantasm.

### Amore profano

The artificial character of constructed femininity, its model made of lace and silk, is not suspended in a void but connected to the body which reveals itself even when it is covered. This connection is also a source of ambivalence. On the one hand, there is attraction, aesthetic acceptance of the subtle language of style employed by femininity, on the other hand – biology, desire and the body itself. In *A Treatise on Poetry*, Angels of Art Nouveau are presented in a highly ambiguous situation

In the dark WC’s of their parents’ homes  
Meditating on the link between sex and the soul  
(111)

The theme of the chamber pot returns obsessively: it is an object whose sole function is to retain bodily secretions, retain the *trace* of the body. Chamber pot is a mandatory element of a future wife – suffices to look at the entomologist’s beloved in “Diary Of A Naturalist”:

She was an unreasonable creature of the fairer sex.  
She chose her Earth of tulle and gauze,  
Of boudoir mirrors that were easily cracked,  
Of faience chamberpots that leave only one ear  
To the excavator’s shovel.

(287)

It is a secret vessel. We call it a *vessel*, even though the committee of “poets of unmentionables with lace” has already declared it a “faience chamberpot” (375). It is also an element of the 19<sup>th</sup> century femininity, from a time when all physiological functions of the body needed to be hidden shamefully while the difficulty to reconcile them with the “façade” exaggerated them grotesquely, introducing a strongly obscene tone and fueling

the anal obsession. The sleds are ready, waiting, and women, already dressed up, take the last chance to use the vessel. Ladies in velveteen skirts,

giggles above a railing, pigtails askew,  
sittings on chamberpots upstairs  
when the sledge jingles under the columns of the porch  
just before the moustachioed ones in wolf fur enter.  
Female humanity,  
children's snot, legs spread apart,  
snarled hair, the milk boiling over,  
stench, shit frozen into clods.  
And those centuries,  
conceiving in the herring smell of the middle of the night  
instead of playing something like a game of chess  
or dancing an intellectual ballet.

(218)

The quoted passage opens with a cultural attribute (skirts), followed by biology revealing itself behind it. Secretary obsession spreads: gradually, the image fills with naturalistic details that evoke the speaker's aversion and embarrassment. Those culminate in disgust towards procreation. And that is the other, darker side of femininity – its inevitable relationship with nature, with triviality, with matters practical and prosaic. Everything that is “natural” or bodily about woman, may also arouse disgust. The poem's suggestion to change the method of conception is, naturally, somewhat auto-ironic, it is unclear, too, which of the speaking voices makes it.

Here is how *The Issa Valley* – a novel about, among others, the frictions between Catholic upbringing and truths of life – speaks about bodily needs: “we are angels [and] we surrender to temptations of the flesh against our wills, without our consent” (188), or so claims Father Monkiewicz, a priest who easily pronounces absolution in exchange for a (repeatedly broken) promise of self-betterment. All of the above is said in the context of Barbarka's attempts to get married to Romuald, and this is how the narrator comments upon a scene where she changes an infant's diaper: “We are given to live on the border of the human and the bestial, and it is good so.”

But sometimes quite the opposite is true. Human being is a contradiction in itself and wants improve but nature pushes it to deeds that are far from glorious. It is not, cannot be an angel.

A coelentera, all pulsating flesh, animal-flower,  
All fire, made up of falling bodies joined by the black pin of sex.

(230)

Obviously, the pin of sex must black.

This is where Miłosz's poetry clearly reflects the complexity and ambiguity of the Christian tradition. In *Song of Songs*, woman and man seek each other out and there is no contradiction between several levels of possible interpretation (literal, symbolic, allegorical). Lovers of the *Song of Songs* are an archetype of seekers of the “real place,”

free from the sense of shame and guilt. Catholicism, however, is dominated by the fear of “lust.” New Testament teaches that “everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 2:28). St Augustine derives lust from the original sin; carnal love existed in Paradise, but there was no lust in it that after the Fall robbed man of full control over his will.<sup>7</sup>

The idea that “we surrender to temptations of the flesh against our wills, without our consent” is, thus, a rigorous, Augustian interpretation of the sin of the body. It also implies that the will is spiritual whereas lust belongs to the world of bestial instincts.

Miłosz’s world is organized hierarchically, with human nature placed at the base upon which rise higher levels of consciousness, culminating in the superhuman, angelic level bordering on the sacrum. Sex is often a stepping down on the ladder of being, it involves giving oneself back to nature. There is no primal holiness of the animal from the animistic beliefs, no holiness of nature and fertility typical of matriarchal beliefs. It is a worldview with several Christian themes deeply ingrained, a worldview with a clear boundary between the sacred and the profane, between man and the lower beings. Sex (as a part of nature, an element of material world) belongs to the profane. At least in theory, as our experiences place sexuality alternatively on the side of the sacred and on the side of the profane. The sacred side is devoid of lust. Interestingly, descriptions of epiphanic moments seem to imply that lust had already been satisfied, a mystical union of elements takes place, the female and the male subject have a sense of “openness” or closeness to the Truth. *Principium individuationis* disappears, but as if “from above,” from the side of the sacrum. When the same starts at the opposite end, man and woman are positioned in the rank of representatives of a species, ruled by lust, controlled not by their own will but by instinct. “Zmieniał się język” [Language has changed] mentions a dark force:

And the force melting men and women  
Into Shakespearian beast with a double back  
Remains a dark affair.

The difference between the search for the “real place” and succumbing to lust is difficult to determine as it seems to depend solely on the approach: one from the inside of the lovers’ experience, or one from a distance – revealing pathetic multitudes of mating “Shakespearian beasts.” One could deem this difference inessential and easy to overcome but it is quite the opposite. The drama it unleashes is a true one, indelible from the Christian tradition. And only someone very naïve would make accusations of inconsistency here. It is not a realm governed by rational logic; phantasmal images of gender are inscribed in a cycle of drives, traumas, unconscious desires, repressions and cultural taboos. Images of women also represent several levels of psyche.

The metonymic construction of femininity outlined earlier in the essay, the phantasmal image of woman as a “hanger for fetishes” where the body is present only as a faint

<sup>7</sup> See: St. Augustine, *City of God*. Trans. to Polish by father W. Kubicki, with an introduction by father J. Salij. Kęty: 1998. 525. A. Fiut wrote on Miłosz’s attitude to nature in “Romans z naturą.” *Moment wieczny. O poezji Czesława Miłosza*. 55-85.

trace, is a clear attempt to neutralize the conflict. One could interpret it as a typical sublimation, an attempt at moving the relation to opposite sex outside the most significant conflict resulting from corporeality – our relation with the matter. Movement towards the past also involves sublimation. The same could be said about making sexuality subject of art. Thus, we can speak of several overlapping mechanisms of sublimation in Miłosz. Sublimation is also a prerequisite for talking about sex – the issue at stake oscillates, in fact, between disclosure of the essence of things and protection of what is most private. Literary names such as Thais, Belinda, Annalena are another signal of the strategy of sublimation. The only missing element is the classical aesthetic sublimation that in the European culture produced numerous methods to idealize the beauty of the beloved, especially her facial features.

At this point, several different issues resurface and overlap, and among them, the inexpressibility of the body. What is cultural, is inscribed in the web of mutual references; meanings are made as a result of their relations to other meaning. Meanwhile, what is natural, of itself requires no expression; on the contrary, there are numerous forces (such as taboo or the threat of vulgarity) that prevent naming, and the sense is not determined. Thus, eroticism reveals itself as a relation of culture developing in contact with nature and not as something simply natural.

One of the distinct characteristics of Miłosz's worldview is a distrust for nature resulting in difficulties in his relation to women. On the one hand, we have a clear "culturalization" of eroticism, even a blurring of its relation to the body, and on the other, insecurity or even aversion in the relation to the body. In Miłosz's autobiographical essay "Catholic Education" (*Native Realm*) a Catholic prefect simply assumes that "nature is an abode of evil" (78). Nature is viewed as the source of repeated human failures, sins that cannot be eradicated or cleansed. The Manichaean poison includes also the dream of leaving behind tormenting ambivalence and unambiguously defining all that was created as a realm of Evil: i.e., Matter.

This results in an ambivalent relationship to one's own body as well:

Confess, you have hated your body,  
Loving it with unrequited love. It has not fulfilled  
Your high expectations. As if you were chained to  
Some little animal in perpetual unrest,  
Or worse, to a madman, and a Slavic one at that.

(321)

Lust, the lowly sphere of drives, cannot be erased and thus a nagging suspicion returns that perhaps this is the base upon which rests the entire mighty construction of existence, including social existence. There is a claim in "Three Talks About Civilization" that the "State would fall" without the "hairy pleasures proper to the flesh" (203). Without them no one would be fit for the barracks and humanity, transformed Arcadian shepherds, would instead busy itself with being moved by the loves of Amyntas while nibbling chocolates in a theater. Love in form of lusty Eros, of pagan Amor, of sensual pleasures, amoral and unpredictable as nature, reveals itself as the basis for the existence of the human

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world. It is also the cause of misery, bringing about the indelible drama of humanity: imprisonment within sex – this, at least, is the interpretation of fertility presented in “Sentences,” a poem neighboring on “Three Talks About Civilization” (206). During its stay in the realm of Platonic ideas, the soul is sexless, angelic. St Augustine believes that the “disease of lust” was unknown in Paradise (its original Latin name – *libido* – might be worth recalling here). The first parents obeyed the command to “multiply” but while at it, they used their will and retained their peace of mind. It may have even been a form of “intellectual ballet.” Nonetheless, St. Augustine was not a visionary and does not confirm it. Later, as a result of pride, human condition deteriorated and the world was drowned in sin. One could, therefore, hypothesize about a world where the drama of sex is resolved, a world before the Fall or a world redeemed. Miłosz, following Swedenborg, offers his own interpretation of *Genesis* regarding the creation of woman:

And Eve, why is she taken from Adam's rib?  
-Because the rib is close to the heart

(416)

The world before the miracle (and the disaster) of *apocatastasis* teems with ambiguity. Man is torn, tormented by ignorance and uncertainty. One of the voices of “I Sleep A Lot” states that “women have only one, Catholic, soul,” while men have two but those words can hardly be taken seriously, as they are uttered to a Medicine Man dancing his magical dance and entering a trance (207). “Two souls” may just as well refer to a higher power as to the lack of harmony and the existential flaw.

Often, however, it seems that it is women who carry the mystery within. It is rooted in sex, hidden beneath the skirt. Barely covered with beads, the dancer of “Dwaj w Rzymie” appears to incarnate the mystery of life. The theme of mesmerizing power of female sex often reappears in Miłosz. In “Voyeur,” the last poem of *This*, curiosity regarding the “small, furry, untameable animal” concludes deliberations on looking at the world and the hunger for visual stimuli evoked by the presence of women. All of this embroiled with philosophy, grammar, poetics, mathematics, even theology. Unquenchable desire becomes the life's driving force. Miłosz is consistent in the repetition of certain words and images: the trivial word “ass” appeared as early as in “Songs Of Adrian Zieliński”:

The round ass of a girl passing by  
Is a planet carved by sunlight's hand

(70)

This is juxtaposed with a vision of an almost cosmic phenomenon watched by the lonely observers. “Asses” return several years later: “I see their legs in miniskirts... their buttocks and thighs, reminding that “we are made so, half from disinterested contemplation, half from appetite” (679). Desire does not evoke aversion or sense of guilt, it is fully accepted, although it undermines the possibility to base the interpretation of the world on a single truth. Miłosz believes the relationships between men and women to be governed by the law of universal gravitation, but it is hard to say whether the latter is mutual. The woman in this relation is indescribable and there is no attempt to introduce her as a person.

In Miłosz's poetry, woman is *looked at* by the man. She is discovered by his sight. It is a special kind of gaze in which the object of the gaze is not indifferent or strange. The chase after reality may end in a passionate discovery, unity of the subject and the object. We can never know whether gravitation is mutual. The accessories of coquetry and the gestures allow to assume that it is. Erotic fulfillment provides a moment of certainty that the difference of sex is not an impassable barrier.

## Erotic pleasure

Analysis presented so far could, perhaps, lead to a conclusion that there simply are no women in Miłosz's poetry, only phantasms. There is no ground here to formulate an answer to the Lacanian question whether the woman exists at all, in other words, whether there exists a separate female identity and how it is supposed to be expressed in the text. It is certainly possible to portray the relation of man and woman as an interpersonal relation. In Miłosz, however, we are presented with a world seen from the perspective of the male subject – one who constructs phantasms, images of the mind that he sees as charged with erotically stimulating potential. The subject does not have to confront them with real, existing people, as modernist poetry is a space of the speaker's utterance and experience.

Women as real persons do exist, nonetheless, and they do not resemble the girl that that Leśmian's twelve brothers dreamt about. (The myth of Pygmalion exemplifies yet another myth of man similarly in love with his own phantasms.) In Miłosz's work, women do not always emerge as a determined, personal identity but they are given existential autonomy. It is difficult to say who hides behind the luring signals, and this usually is not of key importance. There is a crowd of women (passing, recollected) but rarely a "somebody." In Miłosz's poems women rarely manifest their will, they do not talk, one simply sees them, contemplates their set of luring attributes which is erotically stimulating but does not transform into a targeted desire. Pleasure is hedonistic, drawn from delicate erotic arousal, not aimed at the experience of ecstasy. It is difficult to distinguish faces from the crowd (more difficult than other bodyparts). Observing a crowd of women is a recurrent phantasmal situation in Miłosz and what repeatedly returns there is, first and foremost, the experience of the self as an erotic subject. Julia Kristeva claims that in the psychoanalytical perspective, narcissism and idealization are necessary components of love. In Miłosz, love is not part of the situation in question, there is only the element of narcissism.

It has been pointed out to me in a discussion that I ignore "Esse," a poem exhibiting a clear and disinterested aesthetic fascination with the beauty of a girl encountered in the Parisian subway. Yes, Miłosz's *Personal Anthology* does contain a prose poem that the poet refers to in the commentary as a "short love poem." In this case, though, things are not as clear as they seem. In this particular poem, a typically aesthetic sublimation taking the form of a presentation of a "perfect, ideal beauty" is not only of secondary importance, but decidedly overshadowed by other forms. And that is for the best, from a feminist perspective. The artificial ideal of feminine beauty is considered to be one of patriarchal mechanisms that impose on women, treated as objects, impossible demands

and transform them into commodities of determined visual value. Consequently, the (supposedly purely aesthetic) adoration of beauty is believed to often hide male hypocrisy, absent from Miłosz's poem.<sup>8</sup>

One could argue, however, in more depth about the interpretation of "Esse." Is it really a "love poem"? The speaker does not stop at admiring the beautiful face, he wants to "absorb" it, which indicates a need for ownership (with regards to more than just face). The impossibility to absorb it becomes a drama of incomplete cognition. However, the speaker does not take any steps to prevent the beauty from disappearing, does not investigate her identity and what the face represents is of no importance, not to mention the fact that there is no attempt to establish a love relationship. The "face," unstopped, gets off at Raspail.

Miłosz, admiring the urban crowd, does not hide the fact that there is a decidedly erotic aspect to the act, even though he avoids focusing on it. He redirects his attention elsewhere. And this transfer of focus towards reflection (metaphysical, existential, epistemological) is a recurrent movement in several of his poems. Even "Annalena" contains a double gesture of redirecting focus, or shifting sexual energy, towards a more general reflection. In fact, one can hardly view "Annalena" as an erotic, it opens with eroticism that is later blurred, neutralized. Miłosz clearly avoids presentations of eroticism as a demarcated, separate and exclusive ground contained by the cycle of agitation and fulfillment, or as arousal of passion directed at a particular person (with its typical continuation in form of impossibility of fulfillment, experience of hope or loss, possibly also disappointment.)

Eros combines an epistemological reflection, fascination with the world, and metaphysics. Eros opens and initiates. It does not create obligation nor does it promise direct fulfillment. Naturally, transference is a Freudian term but it is not a gesture of escape here but rather of broadening or generalization, and as a result, leads to the conclusion that our relation to the world, desire for knowledge and hunger for experience as well as lust (also for sights, things, new experiences) is always driven by the same kind of energy – that of Eros. Consequently, being in the world implies a neverending drama of unfulfillment or the impossibility of satisfaction.

In "When the Moon," the variety of women passing by astounds, stimulating and provoking an existential reflection. There appears hope, presented in the form of an ambiguous hypothesis, a hope to extract the male relationship with women from the low, carnal sphere, and move it towards the metaphysical:

When the moon rises and women in flowery dresses are strolling,  
I am struck by their eyes, eyelashes, and the whole arrangement of  
the world.  
It seems to me that from such a strong mutual attraction  
The ultimate truth should issue at last.

(222)

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<sup>8</sup> "Beauty" in Humm, M. *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*. Trans. by Umińska, B. and Mikos, J. Warszawa: 1993. <http://rcif.org.pl>

It “should” but so far has not. It is a dream of a transformed world. Longing for a “different life” triggers the return of the theme of Adam and Eve.<sup>9</sup> In Paradise, the ultimate truth was at hand and people did not suffer because of their dual nature.

Here, on earth, everything changed. Sex as a spectacle of the body, embroiled in the matter and marked by lust, often awakens a sense of embarrassment. One dreams, thus, of seeing the world more directly, not deformed, perhaps even not split into vulvae:

And yet we were so like one another  
With all our misery of penises and vaginas  
(515)

The unfortunate “vagina” in question refers to the female representatives of human species, but the appealing *yoni* belongs solely to Annalena. Man (as such) was dragged into the ridiculous and pathetic theater of sex. The vagina-difference is unsurmountable, hiding no *evig weibliche* that certain kinds of “strong men” consider to be the essence of femininity. Desire is a mystery but it is tied to the state of “this world” – one separated from God, transformed after the original sin, touched by the consequences of the Fall. God’s intention, as far as we can judge, was different. In *The Land of Urlo* Swedenborg, the author of *Delitie Sapientia de Amore Conjuga*, is portrayed as one of those who had the courage to speak of a “better” world. Swedenborg interprets the relationship of man and woman, Adam and Eve allegorically, as a figure for the relation of love and wisdom, of Christ and Church, but not only that. It is also part of the myth of love from the beginning of humanity, love that creates and constitutes the world. Those ideals of perfection, supplemented with esotericism, appear in the work of Oscar Miłosz. Czesław Miłosz refers to them repeatedly in his essays, sometimes in his poetry, but does not develop them; they are an element that fits his system but one that is borrowed, always cited with a reference to someone else’s vision. The world of Miłosz’s imagination consists of elements that are much more earthly, much more verifiable.

## Anima

There is one more image of woman in Miłosz’s poetry – that of a friend and confidante, represented, for example, by Anna Kamińska, too good “to learn the wiles of art,” admired for her wisdom and her gift of true love. Characteristically, female friends appear in Miłosz’s poetry while his essays give testimony to intellectual friendships with men. Their complicated history and ideological temperature are revealed mostly in the letters and essays. Poetry engages deeper layers of psyche and this is where the feminine figures make appearance.

In *The Land of Urlo*, Miłosz describes himself as having a very strong Ego, one that mutes the voice of the Unconscious: “I would say that my female anima was hard put to make me acknowledge her as my own” (183). His self-assessment, uttered in

<sup>9</sup> As the theme of Paradise is rather exhaustively discussed by A. Fiut in *Moment...* pp. 170–171, I will not do it in my essay. See also: Cz. Miłosz “Paradise,” “Adam and Eve,” “Gardener.”



a conditional form, (“I would say that”) is very astute. In “Ars Poetica?” the place traditionally assigned to the Muse as an incarnation of the female Unconscious, is instead given to “spirits” that choose the poets for their instrument (241).<sup>10</sup> Usually, a relation to deeper layers of the Unconscious does not reveal itself directly, while the “strong ego” speaks intuitively.

Anna from “The Song” (1934) is the earliest female medium, a spiritual one; talking to the choir she represents distance from the world while the choir – attachment to it. The use of female mask liberates intuition, allowing the barely foreseen senses to speak. Anna, however, has no typical features of a female archetype with its ties to earth and water, she is more of a female soul of the poet who experiences the desire for an “angelic” state. The earth is represented by the lover in another poem from more or less the same period, “Ty silna noc” [You are powerful night]. Here, as well, the speaker “foresees” future fate (and is wrong about it). Overcoming the early catastrophism involved abandoning the style where meanings are not explicitly controlled by the intellect, where they are an unconscious game.

Anima appears infrequently in mature Miłosz, but is not completely absent. It wears literary names such as Hermance or Berenike. The first one, from “Three Talks On Civilization” is the addressee of the monologue. Her name was chosen randomly and does not refer to any historical figure, says Miłosz in the commentary to the poem.<sup>11</sup> Hermance is a timeless and all-understanding medium. Her attention and ability to cross the historical dimension triggers a reflection on what is happening behind the scenes of humanity’s development. Berenike from “The Rite” resembles Hermance. Her name in “Persons” (immediately following “The Rite”) is a lover’s pseudonym but in “The Rite” she is not an object of desire, but a medium for deeper levels of consciousness, and an ideal listener, an emphatic and wise partner in a dialogue on the need of holding off judgments of people based on their complicated fate, and on the ways of worshipping God. She asks the male speaker about the fate of doubters and the last stanza, containing the answer, can be attributed both to the speaker and to Berenike. However, the decision “who speaks” is irrelevant, as they are perfectly spiritually compatible. The gender difference not only is not a barrier, it is a sign of emphatic openness to the speakers to each other. There are other women in Miłosz’s poetry, also in his early work, who embody that emphatic “you.” Recalled from distant past, the characters of courtesans (Venetian courtesans in “No more,” Filina) do evoke not contempt or condemnation but tenderness and understanding for their existence marked by passing and human frailty. If they are to be regarded as the spirit of the world, it is not an evil spirit.

References to Simone Weil play a particularly important role in Miłosz’s essays. He returns to her work also in poetry, and Weil is not a singular case. *This* contains a poem titled “What I Learned from Jeanne Hersch,” a catalogue of twelve principles that are of crucial importance and constitute a kind of private catechism of an intellectual who is

<sup>10</sup> I discuss this in more detail in “Muza współczesna.” *Persona liryczna*. Warszawa: 2000. 241-241.

<sup>11</sup> *Wiersze*. [Poems] Kraków: 1993. Vol. 1. 149.

critical but not entirely stripped of faith in reason, decency and sense. The very existence of female philosophers used to be negated by misogynists convinced of the inability of women to engage in a serious reflection. Miłosz not only “admits the existence” of women philosophers, he is very open to their thought, regarding them not as authorities (as the role would involve a patriarchal notion of domination of one truth) but as perfect partners in an intellectual exchange.

Thus, we have come a full circle, perhaps even a hermeneutic one. From the mysticism of sex, through the trauma in relation to gender, toward the hope of overcoming the difference. From Paradise, through the earthly plane – marked by dualism (of soul and matter and the dualism of sex), towards a future transformation that will heal the tear. In Miłosz, none of the meanings is permanently tied to the woman, they are inter-related and attributing any of them permanently to the notion of “femininity” would be a simplification. Some can be viewed as favorable, other as a testimony of aversion towards women. All have a centuries-long tradition. What is important, is that the hermeneutic circle entails a constant circulation. One must also note that the arrangement of particular meanings and the mutual relations of symbols are unique in Miłosz. It is a “small circle,” where symbolic meanings of femininity connected to Earth and motherhood are clearly marginalized. His religious thought, too, has few references to the typically Polish Catholicism, strongly marked by the matriarchal cult of Virgin Mary. Such perception of femininity is rather frequent in the western culture and typical of the modern civilization. Women, as well, sometimes view the sphere of fertility as dark and are wary of motherhood – especially as they see it as a social degradation, a career obstacle.<sup>12</sup>

Symbolically, the archetype of woman in Miłosz’s work refers to certain aspects of Eve. One should emphasize, though, that it is a thoroughly reinterpreted symbol and only selected of its alleged meanings are chosen. It is not the Eve forever burdened with sin, fallen, more accessible to the forces of evil than to man. Nor is it the Great Mother of Mankind, but rather Eve who retained a certain reflection of Paradise. It is an ideal partner for a strong man, focused on him (and not, for instance, on a child), open to sex and intellectual debate. In Miłosz’s poetry, constitutive elements of the archetype of mother are not a part of the phantasm of woman.

Female characters are also particularly tied to the fragility of existence and its fleeting character. When the male speaker evokes the projection of, for example, Filina, her attention to the details of her dress arouse a feeling of tenderness and understanding for the human fate, a particular sensitivity to that which is transient. The evoked figures of courtesans decidedly contradict our cultural tradition, especially its religious models. The very choice of the word – “courtesan” – is not without significance importance, all other descriptions (such as “whore” or “mistress,” or worse) are strongly degrading, despite referring to more or less the same. However, in ancient Greece, courtesans led

<sup>12</sup> Some aspect of those complexes captured in the context of America in the 70s are discussed by Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as an Experience and Institution*. Trans. to Polish by J. Mizielinska. Warszawa: 2000.

largely independent lives, as opposed to the lawful wives of Greek citizens; they were well educated and could be partners in an intellectual debate. They are also believed to be co-founders of the love letter as a form. Greek wives were treated instrumentally, as producers of progeny. Lack of education and indifference to culture thought to contribute to the wife's matronly dignity.<sup>13</sup> Men who sought the company of women found it outside families, at the same time ruling out in advance the possibility of a courtesan becoming a wife. The barrier of class and social standing was insurmountable.

Christianity introduced different values. Although Christ promised the kingdom of heaven to the fallen women, they were mostly viewed as condemnable, as those who spread immorality and evoke terror as a result of their greatest fall. Some of the Desert Fathers cried upon seeing them.<sup>14</sup> Miłosz does not directly refer to the Greek tradition, however, his heavenly Eve does have the attributes of Aphrodite Kallipygos ("the one with beautiful buttocks") and Venus.

It is difficult to imagine a theological system that would be more directed against woman than Manichaeism. It inevitably results in a call to reject everything that is related to matter. Under such circumstances, love relationships had to take special forms, such as those postulated by the aesthetic ideals courtly love. Octavio Paz notes that the birth of Provençal poetry coincided with the development of the Cathar heresy in the same area.<sup>15</sup> However, Miłosz's thought on women is not burdened with the "Manichean poison," or at least no more than the entirety of modern European culture is. One could say that relation to women moderates the temptation to establish a radical dualism of spirit and matter, as it would have to result in a radical asceticism.

Naturally, this is not feminism. Feminism involves thinking "from the perspective of the woman," a perspective where the woman is a subject (of a text or social action). Miłosz's women are silent for the most part. But there is no obsession of ownership, power and domination in his work. Instead, there is a religious hope of overcoming the antagonism of sex as the difficulty to communicate is – perhaps – a consequence of the original sin.

*Translation: Anna Warszo*

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<sup>13</sup> See: Ganszyniec, R. *Polskie listy miłosne dawnych czasów*. Lviv: 1925.

<sup>14</sup> See: Borkowska, M. *Twarze Ojców Pustyni*, Kraków: 2001; Ostrowska, D. "Wizerunek kobiety w pismach Ojców Kościoła". *Od kobiety do mężczyzny i z powrotem*. Brach-Czajna, J. (ed.) Białystok: 1997. 53-75.

<sup>15</sup> O. Paz. *Double...* 102.