

Teksty Drugie 2012, 1, s. 6-13
Special Issue – English Edition



Introduction

Zdzisław Łapiński

Przeł. Anna Warso

Introduction

That Czesław Miłosz was a poet is a well known fact. But throughout his whole life he also remained a man of letters who practiced multiple forms of writing: novels, essays, reviews, press articles, amongst others. Already in the early thirties, his first steps in poetry were accompanied by editorial activities performed as a co-founder of the “Żagary” literary group and contributor to its periodicals. Kultura was the most prominent magazine Miłosz wrote for beginning in 1951. It was a Polish monthly published abroad, a centre of independent thought, and a strong influence on the intellectuals of Poland and several states of the Soviet camp before the system change in Central Europe. Until the very end, Miłosz continued to respond to events through his writing. He published much, in literary journals and daily papers.

In his literary journalism, he aimed to set a new direction for the poetry of his day. Naturally, the tone and content of his utterance could not have remained unaltered over eight decades of his attempts: from youthful appeals to agitational poems and brutal stylistics of the manifestos in the 30’s, through the mild reproof directed in the 80’s at the young poets who, in their struggle against the falling Communist regime, forgot about the independent rules of art, to didactic examples of haiku and other forms of “objectivist poetry” offered to the succeeding generations of writers (and their readers) in the 90’s. As it is often the case of poets writing prose about poetry, Miłosz’s assessments and directions for his fellows derived from the dilemmas, explorations and decisions that paved the way for the developments in his own writing.

*While his journalistic activities directed at the Polish audiences were meant to influence the course of Polish literature, Miłosz had a different goal when he addressed the English reader, whom he wanted to present with what he believed to be most valuable in the work of contemporary Polish poets and most distinctively Polish. On a few occasions he spoke of “Polish school of poetry,” by which he meant a model of poetics as well as a certain type of sensitivity and attitude to the world expressed through it – the reference field of Miłosz’s term is most clearly delineated in his Harvard lectures (Czesław Miłosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1983). He believed that the importance of Polish poetry laid in the fact that our writers drew conclusions from the experience of WWII and the post-war years: “In it [Polish poetry] a peculiar fusion of the individual and historical took place, which means that events burdening a whole community*

are perceived by a poet as touching him in a most personal manner. Then poetry is no longer alienated” (94-95). He concludes: “The poetic act changes with the amount of background reality embraced by the poet’s consciousness. In our century that background is, in my opinion, related to the fragility of those things we call civilization or culture. What surrounds us, here and now, is not guaranteed. It could just as well not exist – and so man constructs poetry out of the remnants found in ruins” (97).

Miłosz himself is a major figure among the poets of the Polish school and a few years ago, beginning with the poet’s scattered remarks on the subject, Dutch Slavacist, Arent van Nieuwerkerken, put forth a remarkably astute outline of a historical literary synthesis of this particular development in the Polish poetry (Ironiczny konceptyzm. Nowoczesna polska poezja metafizyczna w kontekście anglosaskiego modernizmu, Kraków: “Universitas”, 1998). Van Nieuwerkerken presents the history of the movement on the example of its several prominent representatives, from the 19th century precursor of the “school,” Cyprian Norwid (1821 – 1983) to Stanisław Barańczak (b. 1946). Van Nieuwerkerken calls them “ironic moralizers,” a term borrowed from Barańczak, and believes the Polish school to be a distinctive modification of modernism, parallel to its Western counterpart.

The present volume offers a selection of articles published in *Teksty Drugie* and concerning Miłosz, as well as those 20th century Polish poets that he focused on in his commentaries and translations. One should bear in mind that although presented texts were published between 2001-2007, they describe much older literary phenomena. Today, the “Polish school of poetry,” as Miłosz saw it, is a historical term and the authors that he translated and commented on, such as Stanisław Barańczak, Miron Białoszewski, Zbigniew Herbert, Wisława Szymborska, Anna Świrszczyńska (Anna Świr), Tadeusz Różewicz or Aleksander Wat are part of the Polish canon.

The 20th century was one of the darker periods in the history of Europe, especially in those of its parts that Timothy D. Snyder referred to as the “bloodlands.” At the same time, it was, in its own way, a good period for those poets who managed to fulfill their public mission without sacrificing the requirements formulated for art by the European modernism.

The thematic range and the wealth of expression encountered by Miłosz scholars in his work is intimidating, and perhaps this is why the title of Jan Błoński’s book *Miłosz jak świat* [*Miłosz as the World*] (Kraków: Znaki, 1998) often resurfaces in their analyses. At the same

Czesław Miłosz and the Polish School of Poetry

time, despite its extravagant richness, Miłosz's oeuvre is very distinctive. Ryszard Nycz, editor in chief of *Teksty Drugie* and one of the leading Polish literary theorists, believes that "a continuous quest beyond the [available] word determines the general direction and the dominant idea of Miłosz's work." In his essay, however, Nycz focuses on something else – on the transformations of Miłosz's poetry. He distinguishes four phases of its development: "poetic of visionary commonality" ("an attempt at...revealing the muted or marginalised aspects of everyday life and existential experience"); "poetic of public discourse" (which "crosses the boundaries of the traditional lyrical language, opening its domain to all types and genres of modern writing...and to the entire cultural universe of discourse"); "poetic of parabolic autobiography" (that Miłosz discovered "in his private experience of the past," "open to the future by its very (human) nature, a reality whose permanence, order and meaning lie in a constant process of representing, telling and interpreting."); and finally, "poetic of inhuman indication." Miłosz's last poetic is a radical departure in his work, undermining the very foundations of the "Polish school." Because, as Nycz believes, "to indicate the existence of the inhuman is to indicate a world which cannot be framed by human categories, a world that is without a past and future and can do without the human experience of time which cannot be represented, told or interpreted."

Arent van Nieuwerkerken does not attempt to capture the full range of Miłosz's poetry but discusses one of its major motifs: the striving to overcome empirical time and to present in a single synthetic attempt several different chronological moments, believed to give a sense of the divine perspective on human reality, as "at the end of the road that has been designated by Miłosz's poetics of epiphany stands a theological postulate." Nieuwerkerken traces the evolution of Miłosz's "existential autobiography" (that he defines differently than Nycz) and places it against the comparative background of the work by, among others, William Wordsworth, a representative of the Romantic movement who "proposed an integral interpretation of man's being-in-the-world by creating an existential autobiography that went far beyond the somnambulist, 'lunar' aspects of existence."

The Romantic tradition has remained the tradition of Polish poetry from the early decades of the 19th century to the present day and the reason for it is simple: it was also the period when our most prominent literary masterpieces were composed. One can reject Romantic ideology, as several generations of thinkers, politicians, and men of letters did and continue to do, but to dismiss the work of Malczewski, Mickiewicz, Słowacki, and Norwid amounts to as much as dismissing the role of Shakespeare, Milton, and Wordsworth in English literature would. This, however, is not the case of the Baroque, an epoch shaping the material culture and the mentality of Poles before Romanticism. Jan Błoński (1931-2009), one of the most renowned participants of Polish intellectual life and an astute commentator of 20th century literature, believes that the presence of the Baroque in Poland is "so obvious...that it is almost invisible." In "The Stubborn Persistence of the Baroque," Błoński sketches this presence with a few light strokes and concludes:

The baroque in Poland was strongly influenced by the Counter-Reformation (or Catholic Reformation, especially in its Jesuit form). It retained, especially at the very beginning, close connections to Rome: the Church of Saints Peter and Paul in Cracow was built only a few years after the Church of the Gesù in Rome. It was this cultural proximity that sensitized

it to the growing complication of forms inherited from the Renaissance and embedded in the memory and imagination of artists and poets. But Polish baroque also relied on the not so distant medieval tradition, as well as the local ones, especially in eastern Poland where it slowly acquired its increasingly Sarmatian features.

Those three characteristics of the baroque in Poland continue to return today, subversively echoed and in a distorted manner: Gombrowicz winks at the reader, pretending to be a Sarmatian, Miłosz's work reaches back to its religious heritage, while other writers and poets reestablish their connection to the baroque through affinity for conceit and linguistic sophistication.

The concept of a Polish school of poetry was embraced by American Slavist, Clare Cavanagh, the author of Lyric Poetry and Modern Politics: Russia, Poland, and the West (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2009), inspired by Miłosz's ideas. In "The Limits of Lyric: Western Theory and Postwar Polish Practice" Cavanagh returns to the kernel of his thought: the complex relation of poetry and history. With the example of several poets (Miłosz, Herbert, Szymborska, and Zagajewski) she reveals how those authors, heavily influenced by a history of oppression and the experience of "mega-history" promoted by the power apparatus, managed nonetheless to develop a disillusioned but non-nihilistic attitude to art as a historical phenomenon. The heaviness of reality is always present in their poems but at the same time there is also a will to overcome it: "All efforts to step outside time, the lyric reminds us, are doomed to fail in advance, which is why the lyric poet must struggle time and again to achieve the "revenge of a mortal hand" [Szymborska], the temporary reprieve from mortality that is all we can hope for at best."

Among the most important characteristics of the Polish school is the imperative to "give testimony" which refers primarily to the communal fate and express the sense of being rooted in history. Miłosz believed Zbigniew Herbert to give the fullest expression to this postulate. Contrasting both poets, Bogdana Carpenter points to the creative differences in their work, both in their understanding of the idea of "testimony" and its poetic incarnations ("Ethical and metaphysical testimony in the poetry of Zbigniew Herbert and Czesław Miłosz.") Most importantly, she emphasises, Herbert never moves away from his postulates while Miłosz "breaks the paradigm that he co-created in the 40's, demarcating, not for the first time, new tracks and grounds for the Polish poetry. The interest in metaphysical poetry noticeable in the last few years among young poets and critics is a proof that the author of Theological Treatise remains a faithful – and an unmatched – witness not only to his own time."

Among the eminent poets of the second half of the 20th century there were several who rivalled Miłosz, each of them adopting a different attitude to the world and formulating a separate poetic. Some of them followed the example Miłosz set through his own work (for instance, Zbigniew Herbert), others consciously reached for different means (Tadeusz Różewicz). There were also those who wrote as if the "Miłosz phenomenon" was non-existent, even though both their readers and authors themselves could not have possibly ignore the shadow cast by Miłosz on the entirety of Polish poetry (such as in the case of Miłosz Białoszewski).

Białoszewski deserves closer attention as he inhabits very distant peripheries of the Polish school. He differed from Miłosz in all aspects, from the choice themes to the formal side of his work. They had a different attitude to language as well. Miłosz attempted to touch directly

Czesław Miłosz and the Polish School of Poetry

major issues of his era and final, metaphysical matters, all while trying to protect the Polish language from the mundane. Although he did use lower registers and rarely abandoned irony, one of his main goals was to resurrect the “high” style. Białoszewski, on the contrary, avoided exalted notions at all cost, and his linguistic material of choice was the ordinary and the colloquial. He also freely transformed morphological structures. And yet, major issues (historical and trans-historical) continue to resurface in his work, obeying his own rules derived from the “low” speech. The manner in which these two poets are written about is symptomatic of the readers’ attitudes: Miłosz is referred to as the “Nobel Prize winner” and Białoszewski as “Miron” (no other Polish poet canonized by the audiences has so far been referred to with this degree of familiarity.)

It is one of Miłosz’s great merits that he saw the value of, and attempted to translate to English, the work of a poet so radically different from his own poetic. The linguistic specificity of Białoszewski heavily limits the potential for a successful translation – the degree of Miłosz’s achievement in this regard, as well as his strategies, are discussed by Tomasz Łysak in “Miron Białoszewski as interpreted by Czesław Miłosz.”

Białoszewski’s work is also the focus of Marek Zaleski’s “Białoszewski: Idyllic.” Zaleski connects the striking affirmation of the world in Białoszewski’s debut-making 1956 collection, *The Revolution of Things* to the Orphic tradition of faith in the creative power of poetry found in modernist art. Zaleski analyses the Orphic element within the framework of the “idyll-of-self” and its particular subgenre, “idyll of one’s own room” (both terms introduced by Renato Poggioli).

He discovers a different incarnation of the Orphic tradition – of postmodern rather than modern character – in “Orpheus and Eurydice” (2002), one of Miłosz’s later (and most important) long poems. As he did in his essay on Białoszewski, in “Instead” Zaleski traces the connections between the antique tradition and the 20th century transformations of the myth that “has become a philosophical parable [while] Orpheus himself – the eponym of the poet and the epitome of the adventure of poetry.” The message of the parable is sinister, however, and Miłosz, contrary to his previous work that affirmed existence in the spirit of Christian theology, appears to agree with his intellectual antagonists such as Nietzsche and Blanchot, insists Zaleski. He believes “Orpheus and Eurydice” to put “an end to the hope pervading Miłosz’s work, the hope of resurrection of what was in the word.”

In his attempts to encourage the interest of the English audiences in the poets of the Polish school, Miłosz made efforts to maintain objectivity and suppress his own preferences and dislikes. These were poets that he knew personally, several were his friends, others he debated against. Most of them make an appearance in Miłosz’s own poetry as well, and it is in his poetry that Miłosz reveals his deeply emotional and diversified attitude towards other authors, discussed by poet and critic Jacek Łukasiewicz in his essay (“Poet on poets”). Łukasiewicz reveals how the demands of literary conventions shaped the character and poetic “definitions” of their work. He very aptly comments on one of the more intriguing definitions, the metaphor referring to Tadeusz Różewicz: “he digs in black soil/ is both the spade and the mole cut in two by the spade.”

Women have always played an important role in Miłosz’s work, and an even more important one in his private life. Popularizing the work of Anna Świrszczyńska (Anna Świr),

both in Poland and abroad, is one of his great achievements. Świrszczyńska strongly emphasised her womanhood (or, perhaps, even her “baba-hood”). In one of her essays, Anna Nasilowska offered a typology of women appearing in Miłosz’s work. The present volume includes another essay by Nasilowska, one devoted to the worldview and poetic of selected 20th century female poets. Nasilowska places them between two poles: that of androgyny seen as an idea of identity in which “the speaker of the poem neutralizes the compulsion to define themselves in each situation with regards to gender that is present in normal social life.” The other pole posits womanhood as a “strong, basic and irreducible part of identity.” Nasilowska concludes:

Those two patterns of identity do not exhaust the issue of poetic creations concerning womanhood, they only outline one of the tension lines. The difficulty in capturing phenomena has several causes. The feminist revolution took place in the Polish poetry without the feminist debate; today’s categories do not fully correspond to the historical situation. Sometimes one cannot even describe the internal convictions contained in the text with the categories proposed by the Western feminism which continues to emphasize the constraint (and oppressiveness) of heterosexuality whereas Polish poets willingly mythologize the heterosexual act of sex seeing in the process the value of rebellion, of crossing the cultural norm that in fact imposes silence.

Her last sentence refers to the state of Polish poetry in the 1960’s. Androgyny was at an earlier stage of its development but its elements survived, and sometimes finds an original expression, for instance, in the poetry of Wisława Szymborska, Nasilowska notes.

Szymborska’s poetry is discussed in Małgorzata Czermińska’s “Ekphrases in the poetry of Wisława Szymborska.” Czermińska is the author of a monumental work on the literary motif of the cathedral (Gotyk i pisarze. Topika opisu katedry, Gdańsk : Słowo/obraz terytoria, 2005). Her essay presented in this volume focuses on ekphrasis in Szymborska’s work and concludes:

The descriptive element in ekphrases is always dependent on the interpretative idea which allows us to say something interesting about the problems which interest the poet also in her other works, thematically unrelated to the aesthetic qualities of any painting. These problems are mainly time, the creative power of an artist, human cruelty throughout history and different ways of understanding femininity. Ultimately, these ekphrases say more about the imagination of the poet than about the works of art they depict. However, they say it differently than in poems where the space between the poet and her readers is not occupied by any painting, sculpture or photograph serving as an intermediary.

*Photography, or rather the process of taking photographs as a recurrent theme in poetry, is discussed by Cezary Zalewski in “The one moment. Photographing in Polish poetry of the twentieth century.” with the example of three poems (by Tytus Czyżewski, Stanisław Barańczak and Janusz Szuber.) Czyżewski is included in the Polish poetic canon as the author of *Pastorałki*, a brilliant folk-dadaist conglomerate (which is also how he is remembered by Miłosz in *Treatise on Poetry*, however, his “*Mediumiczno-magnetyczna fotografia poety Brunona Jasińskiego*” [A Mediumistic-magnetic Photograph of Poet Brunon Jasiński] derives from a different area of interest – spiritualist practices that the poets and writers of the beginning of the 20th century were involved in. Over half a century later, Barańczak’s “*Zdjęcie*”*

[A Photograph] offers a concise image of the American mentality as seen by the author, having newly immigrated to the US from Eastern Europe, not differing in his diagnosis from the one presented by another observer of American custom, Jean Baudrillard. Finally, the most recent among the three poems, Szuber's "Eliasz Puzet's photographing schoolgirls from the Higher Institute of Educational Science in S. during the picnic in May 1902" evokes a scene from the life of Polish countryside. Despite thematic differences and the broad time span that they encompass, all the poems offer a common "thanatological conclusion," as "photographing (and photography) can now be used to penetrate different discourses, uncovering in them a more or less hidden fascination with death."

Miłosz believed, as his great predecessor Cyprian Norwid did, that one of his major literary obligations is saying farewell to departing friends and respected representatives of public life. Polish history has offered numerous occasions for poems on the subject. A similar attempt to commemorate can be found in the poetry of Tadeusz Różewicz but, as Wordsworth observes, "without the belief in immortality, wherein these several desires originate, neither monuments nor epitaphs, in affectionate or laudatory commemoration of the deceased, could have existed in the world." Norwid and Miłosz followed from the same assumption. So did Różewicz but he no longer believed in immortality, nor did see the faith in it in contemporary culture. Hence his dilemmas, analysed in detail by Hanna Marciniak who begins her discussion with the above quoted passage from Wordsworth. ("Our monuments are ambiguous...": On Różewicz's Epitaphs.)

The presence of Stanisław Barańczak – poet, translator, literary critic and Harvard professor, and previously a democratic activist in Communist Poland – has been distinctly visible on our intellectual scene. One of his most important collections, *Surgical Precision* (1998), is discussed by Jerzy Kandziora in "That which is slipping away": On Exposing the Idiom in Stanisław Barańczak's "Surgical Precision." In his essay Kandziora, who published a thorough study of the poet (*Ocalony w gmachu wiersza: o poezji Stanisława Barańczaka*, 2007) offers an analysis of the linguistic features of Barańczak's poetry in selected, particularly distinctive poems. Kandziora begins with observations on the stylistic choices of the title poem of *Surgical Precision* and moves to more general remarks, concluding: "I think that this autothematic frame, bearing the message: "My poems are just uncertain indications of something that we should not "throw away" as "we may need it soon" "helps to understand why "Surgical Precision" gave its title to the entire collection and in some sense supports all of Stanisław Barańczak's work, so much inclined towards the Unknowable."

The volume closes with Janusz Sławiński, one of the most prominent figures in our literary studies of the last five decades ("Unassigned (XV)"). His collection of private notes, consisting of impeccably composed self-contained units typical of the author, discusses the poems written after the imposition of martial law by the decrepit Communist regime on 13 January 1981. Work of that period did not prove to have had a lasting impact, nor did it result in outstanding texts or innovative poetics, but it very well exemplifies the dilemmas faced by every poet required to take a stand against political violence that changes the very basis of social life. Sławiński analyses anonymous, popular and quasi-folk writing (extremely popular at that time) as well as the work of recognised authors. The former revealed and integrated

previously dispersed sense of alienation from the political system imposed after WWII, the latter either reaches for the historico-philosophical stereotypes of the Polish Romanticism, or – in form of commemorative poetry – documents events from the perspective of democratic activists, usually interned at that time. Sławski's concise remarks provide a background for a better understanding of the fragile balance achieved by the prominent poets discussed earlier in the volume, balance between social activism and the innate rules of art. They may also serve as an epitaph for the Polish school of poetry.

Zdzisław ŁAPIŃSKI

Translation: Anna Warso