

MARCIN JAWORSKI

## *SONGS OF ECSTATIC DESPAIR. MIŁOSZ AND THE COUNTERCULTURE*

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the relationship between the American counterculture of the 1960s and Miłosz’s poetry created during that time in Berkeley. The poet observes the student revolt through his own experience with history, including his leftist sympathies. He is critical both of the naïve hippie postulates and Herbert Marcuse’s new version of Marxism. However, he treats counterculture as a symptomatic response to vital problems of the Western civilization in the second half of the twentieth century. He reflects upon the influence of art on power, totalitarianism as well as democratic. He sees the necessity of commitment, though he asks about its form and effects. Countercultural experiments coincide also with Miłosz’s own search for “a more capacious form” and with the epiphanies described in his poems.

**Key words:** Czesław Miłosz, counterculture, engaged literature, Marxism, epiphany

Czesław Miłosz was a professor at the University of California since the autumn of 1960, when the counterculture was born and flourished there. For the American contestation Berkeley was a very important place. Aldona Jawłowska, the author of the still most important Polish study of this subject writes that the 1964 protest at the local university campus “was decisive for the further development of the student revolt in the USA” (Jawłowska 1975: 59–68; trans. M.B.). It marked the beginning of the biggest wave of riots that swept through America before 1969 (Marwick 1998: 536–546, 642–675).

It is from the *Visions from San Francisco Bay*, of course, that we can learn the most about Miłosz’s attitude to America, which was complex and not very favourable for the counterculture. Charging it with political naïvety, lack of historical memory, superficial religiosity, and, most importantly, hypocrisy, Miłosz wrote about the American contestation that “[i]n

its most striking forms, the movement I am discussing is just such a transitory subculture, or, rather, it is one that melts into the general flow of fashion” (Miłosz 1982: 124). However, it is difficult not to notice that the counterculture remains one of the main topics in this volume of essays. It is undoubtedly interesting for the author, who perceives it as a major social force, a new intellectual and moral movement which is “one of the symptoms of America’s split into two mutually hostile parts” and can have a significant effect on changes in the Western civilization (Miłosz 1982: 124, 134). In this Miłosz perhaps overestimates the counterculture, putting it on a par with the American conservatism, although this hyperbole could be justified by the essayistic mode of writing. Walking through the hippieland does not make him overly enthusiastic, but he does not shun the phenomenon either: he is eager for new aesthetic, religious and moral quests. He records his observations with irony, but not without an evident dose of liking for the young rebels, some of whom are, after all, his students. Another source of information about Miłosz’s attitude to the counterculture are his letters; he wrote about it to many important people, like Merton, Giedroyc, Jeleński, Wat and Marek Skwarnicki. A concise account of these epistolary exchanges was given by Andrzej Franaszek in his biography of Miłosz (Franaszek 2011: 606–608, 876). Franaszek shows that Miłosz agreed with many of the postulates of the student revolt, although he frequently treated it with sarcasm and disrespect. The most important of the postulates were: to oppose the war in Vietnam; to stand up in defence of the autonomy of the academia; and to show reluctance towards the Conservatives in power. Sadly, Franaszek limits his account to a few anecdotes only, and seems to underestimate it a little.

Miłosz’s reflection upon the greening America turns out to be less straightforward in his poetry. This becomes the most evident in his poems from the 1960s and 1970s, most of them collected in the volume *City Without a Name* published in 1969. It is Miłosz’s poems that I will chiefly refer to in the following part of this article.

## Against the Revolution

Miłosz’s basic gesture lies in rejecting the countercultural ideology, especially in its extreme form and viewed as a new version of Marxism, which existed also among the influential left-wing élite. Characteristically,

*Visions from San Francisco Bay* end with a discussion of the views of his “colleague at the University of California.” This critique of Herbert Marcuse’s views should not come as a surprise, for it springs from the experience of an Eastern European intellectual, and Miłosz here confirms the rule rather than stands out as an exception, even if we take into account the complexity of his relationship with contemporary culture. His diagnosis is very similar to that of Leszek Kołakowski, who, a few years later, reproached the author of *One-Dimensional Man* for the derivative quality of his views on the effects of “modern technology and spiritual impoverishment,” writing in the third volume of the *Main Currents of Marxism*:

Marcuse’s programme (...): to destroy democratic institutions and tolerance in the name of a totalitarian myth, subjecting science and technology (...) to a nebulous ‘essential’ intuition which is the exclusive property of philosophers hostile to empiricism and positivism.

There could hardly be a clearer instance of the replacement of Marx’s slogan ‘either socialism or barbarism’ by the version ‘socialism equals barbarism.’ And there is probably no other philosopher in our day who deserves as completely as Marcuse to be called the ideologist of obscurantism (Kołakowski 1981: 420).

In his discussion of Marcuse, Miłosz is more nuanced; he appreciates his revolutionary zeal, at the same time openly distancing himself from it. He launches a frontal attack on the most belligerent rebels. Both Kołakowski and Miłosz noticed here a possibility of a totalitarian utopia. Most importantly, however, Miłosz pointed out the negative nature of the counterculture’s political, or generally, philosophical proposal. The author of *The Rising of the Sun* perceived it as a rebellion against life itself. He called it an inherently romantic gesture against the Creator, or, in theological terms, a kind of temptation he was familiar with and knew it was easy to give in to. Miłosz could not accept any form of it. The final poetic cycle from the *City Without a Name*, entitled “Zapisane wczesnym rankiem mową niezwiązaną” (Written Early in the Morning in Unbound Speech) begins with a poem “Counsels,” and while it does contain the following statement concerning the Western civilization: “It’s true, I did not happen to see the triumph of justice,” it also contains the following lines:

There is so much death, and that is why affection  
for pigtails, bright-colored skirts in the wind,  
for paper boats no more durable than we are...

(Miłosz 2001: 237–238)

The response to social injustice, chaos of history and ruthlessness of nature is affirmation of life, in other words, a sort of virtue, which – according to Miłosz – should consist in doing culture. But Miłosz combines the two perspectives: the hope he professes goes parallel with the awareness of the transient nature of individual life in the face of uncontrollable and thus more powerful forces. It is an unstable balance, hence in his poetry the ecstatic praise of life often finds a reflection in despair.

## Against Indifference

In this context, the poem “Twój głos” (Your Voice) (also from the cycle “Zapisaane wczesnym rankiem mową niezwiązaną”) sounds ambiguously:

Przeklinaj śmierć. Niesprawiedliwie jest nam wyznaczona.

(...)

Nie wiem tylko, co możesz zrobić, sam, ze śmiercią innych,  
dzieci obłanych ogniem, kobiet rażonych śrutem, oślepych żołnierzy,  
która trwa wiele dni, teraz, tu, obok ciebie.

Bezdomna twoja litość, nieme twoje słowo,  
i boisz się wyroku za to, że nic nie mogłeś.

(Miłosz 2003: 79–80)

Curse death. It has been unjustly assigned to us.

(...)

But I don't know what you alone can do with the death of others,  
of children bathed in flames, women pelted with shot, blinded soldiers,  
which has been going on for many days, now, here, next to you.

Your pity is homeless, your word is dumb,

and you are scared of being sentenced for the fact you could do nothing.

(philological translation; M.B.)

On the one hand, the poem may be interpreted as a polemic with the countercultural rebellion against the war in Vietnam. Miłosz wrote in a similar vein when he referred to Marcuse's claim about the harmfulness of the Western civilization: “But what about diseases, and worldwide epidemics, not to mention the universality of death?” (Miłosz 1982: 196). On the other hand, however, it may be perceived as an act of self-deprecation, a reflection upon his own involvement in social life, which by no means has to be extreme, but should consist of responsibility or rescue rather than

indifference. This problem will torment the poet repeatedly. In the next volume, *The Rising of the Sun*, the second poem bears a significant title, “Ryba” (A Fish):

Pośród wrzasków, ekstatycznych bełkotów, pisku trąbek, bicia w rondle i bębny  
 Najwyższym protestem było zachowanie miary.  
 Ale zwyczajny głos ludzki tracił swoje prawo  
 I był jako otwarcie się pyszczka za ścianą akwarium.  
 Przyjmowałem, co mnie sądzone. Niemniej byłem tylko człowiekiem,  
 To znaczy cierpiałem, dążąc do istot podobnych sobie.  
 (Miłosz 2003: 96)

Among the screams, ecstatic gibberish, squeal of the trumpets, banging of the  
 saucepans and drums  
 The highest form of protest was to keep the measure.  
 But the ordinary human voice was losing its right  
 And was like a mouth open behind the glass of the aquarium.  
 I accepted what had been assigned to me. Still, I was only human,  
 Which means I suffered, approaching beings similar to me.  
 (philological translation; M.B.)

This poem is yet another answer to the question about salvation carried by poetry, this time in the context of contestation movements. Miłosz is consistent here: in the volume the poem is preceded by one called “A Task,” which contains the following line: “But pure and generous words were forbidden,” and followed by another called “An Hour,” which ends in the following words: “mortals,/ So that they might praise, as I do, life, that is, happiness” (Miłosz 1998: 219; 221) I will not go as far as to say that the student revolt at the University of California made the poet revise one of the most important notions in his poetry; however, it certainly did not leave it intact.

## Against the State

It is beyond question that Miłosz criticized the counterculture. But it is worth, perhaps, to comment on yet another obviousness, and make it less obvious. Some of the postulates of the counterculture were congruent with the author’s convictions and intuitions concerning the American democ-

racy and culture, especially mass culture. The poem “Counsels,” whose concluding lines were cited above, contains also the following:

It's true, I did not happen to see the triumph of justice.  
 The lips of the innocent make no claims.  
 And who knows whether a fool in a crown,  
 a winecup in his hand, roaring that God favors him  
 because he poisoned, slew, and blinded so many,  
 would not move the onlookers to tears: he was so gentle.

(...)

Man has been given to understand  
 that he lives only by the grace of those in power.  
 Let him therefore busy himself sipping coffee, catching butterflies.  
 He who cares for the Republic will have his right hand cut off.

(Miłosz 2001: 237–238)

It belongs to a group of poems devoted to what could be termed as metaphysics of power. What I mean here is, for example, “King Popiel” and the first part of “Three Talks on Civilization.” A similar thought was expressed by Miłosz several years later at Harvard University in a lecture entitled “The Lesson of Biology:”

[After the year 1914 – M.J.] A discovery has been made, that “civilizations are mortal.” Thus there is nothing to protect Western civilization from plunging into chaos and barbarity. The state of savagery, which seemed to belong to the remote past, returned as the tribal status of totalitarian states. The extermination camp became a central fact of the century and barbed wire its emblem. Thomas Mann was undoubtedly right in seeing Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* as a work inaugurating the twentieth century. Europeans had for a long time been effectively hiding certain horrors in their colonial backyard, until they were visited by them with a vengeance (Miłosz 1984: 51).

In such consistently repeated diagnoses, Miłosz failed to show optimism in defining what he himself referred to as human nature, or *humanness*, nor was he an avid enthusiast of the West. The greatest achievements of the European civilization brought on its greatest decline, specifically totalitarianisms and homicide. An in-depth diagnosis of this phenomenon was given by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in their *Dialectics of the Enlightenment*, which was, as Marek Siemek writes, a cult book of “the student revolt, the New Left and the alternative social movements”

(Siemek 2010: 254; trans. M.B.). Miłosz, who witnessed all kinds of social orders in the Europe of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, seems to imply that humankind has learned nothing in this respect. This means that while forms of power do change, the ways of ruling do not. Or, to put it more mildly, no social order can cope with chaos and injustice inscribed in the human fate, and every attempt of fixing it will end up in a disaster.

## Against Despair

Questions about ideology, involvement or power are only some of the many Miłosz asks in the context of the counterculture. While they constitute a visible, dark tone of his poetry, there are other elements which undermine it.

“When the Moon,” dated 1966, is a poem devoted to – as it seems – Berkeleyan hippie women, walking in the night:

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.

(Miłosz 1998: 187)

Aleksander Fiut writes about this poem that it is “as if (...) a model of the metaphysical order of the world” which is ungraspable by logic or rational judgement (Fiut 1998: 33–34; trans. M.B.). What “attraction” is meant here? The one occurring between the eyes, the eyelashes and the arrangement of the world? Between the moon and the flowery dresses? Between the speaker and the whole lot? What the poem describes is erotic fascination, which characterizes not only the feeling of admiration towards women walking in the moonlight, but first and foremost the attitude to the reality able to be grasped and felt in a sensual, intuitive and irrational – indeed an erotic way. Miłosz often described the world in a similar vein. It is not impossible that eroticism, which played a fundamental role in the revolt of the 1960s, influenced this poem in some way. It would be difficult to pass any definitive judgements on that; what remains certain is that Miłosz did *not* welcome sexual liberation as a doctrine or a countercultural version of psychoanalysis.

A poem in which the countercultural trace is more visible and which can also be regarded as affirmation of reality is the one entitled “The Year,” opening the volume *City Without a Name*:

In its groves and chambers the pulse of music was beating strongly, running down from dark mountains, tributaries entangled.

A generation clad in patterned robes trimmed with little bells greeted me with the banging of conga drums.

I repeated their guttural songs of ecstatic despair walking by the sea when it bore in boys of on surfboards and washed my footprints away.

(...)

I would have related, had I known how, everything which a single memory can gather for the praise of men.

O sun, o stars, I was saying, holy, holy, holy is our being beneath heaven and the day and our endless communion.

(Miłosz 1998: 181)

Here, the events on the Californian campus become part of a larger reality which is practically impossible to capture. The counterculture is presented as loud, colourful, exuberant and ephemeral. However, the hippie generation sings *songs of ecstatic despair*, which in this poem rhyme with the Biblical line and are repeated by the narrator. It is possible that the author liked the spontaneous exuberance, the element of fun and the joy of life unencumbered by social norms, all present in the counterculture and being perhaps the only possible positive response to the cruelty and injustice of the world against which it rose.

## Against Form

The poem in which the counterculture is the most visible is “Zapisane wczesnym rankiem” (Written Early in the Morning) – dated 1967 and first published in *Prywatne obowiązki* (Private Duties) in 1972. These are the opening lines of this well-known text:

Tam gdzie urodziwe dziewczyny chodzą boso, a długowłosi brodaci młodzieńcy przewiązują czoło wstążką, wzorem Czerwonoskórych,

W Berkeley, na Telegraph Avenue,

W ów czas, kiedy z jarzącej się aż do Golden Gate zatoki wyruszały co dzień okręty ładowne żołnierzami i substancją spalającą ludzi,

Kiedy nikt nie wierzył mędrcom i kaznodziejom, a spełniało się proroctwo kacerzy, bo przemijał Kościół chrześcijański, „wielka wszetecznicza”,  
 (...)

(Miłosz 2003: 31)

Where pretty girls walk barefoot, and long-haired bearded boys tie a ribbon  
 round their forehead, like Redskins,

In Berkeley, Telegraph Avenue,

At the time when, from the harbor illuminated up to the Golden Gate, ships wo-  
 uld set off every day loaded with soldiers and a substance for burning people,

When nobody believed sages or preachers and the prophecy of heretics was  
 coming true, for the Christian Church, the ‘great harlot,’ was declining,  
 (...)

(philological translation; M.B.)

Further on in the poem, besides the *psychedelic posters*, bookshops, the flower vendor and the hippies *squatting on the pavement*, on a stall with reproductions of masterpieces of the European painting, the narrator comes across a book from which he cites a lengthy passage about Maximus of Tyre and his art. The poem ends with the following lines:

Ktoś zastanawiać się będzie, czy to wiersz, czy proza i w jakiej intencji Miłosz  
 przypadkowe podaje do druku.

Ja jednak wolałbym wreszcie być poza wierszem i prozą, poza intencją i uza-  
 sadnieniem.

(Miłosz 2003: 35)

Someone may wonder whether this is verse or prose, and with what intention  
 Miłosz is publishing such a random thing.

But I'd rather finally remain outside both verse and prose, outside intention  
 and justification.

(philological translation; M.B.)

The poem is an apt description of the ambience on the campus taken over by the flower children: a combination of a spontaneous, sensual freedom, political engagement, religious inquiry and free access to a variety of books. It seems, however, that the poem is countercultural in its form as well. This loosening of form typical of Miłosz's later books and poems

(written at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s: *The Separate Notebooks*, *Unattainable Earth*, and “Dla Heraklita” [For Heraclitus]) occurs for the first time in the text cited above. Ryszard Nycz points here to many contexts and relevant literary inspirations, most importantly to the tradition of the European and Polish poetry of Modernism and Postmodernism. The scholar suggests that such a “notebookish and sylvan” construction was to serve two main functions. First, it broke up the textual cohesion of the poem, directing the reader outwards and making her search for relationships with other contexts. Second, it promoted a redefined poetics of epiphany and seeking contact with the authentic. According to Nycz, the new form sprang from “the conviction about insufficiency of language and the ungraspable nature of the reality” (Nycz 2001: 163–171; trans. M.B.). The first time Miłosz had tried to compose verse in this way was while remembering the walk along Telegraph Avenue crowded with hippies. I would not claim that it was one of the key inspirations, but I think it is worth taking into account.

## Many years later

The counterculture does not often appear in Miłosz’s poetry. In the 1990s, in his poem “To Allen Ginsberg,” he wrote:

I envy your courage of absolute defiance, words inflamed, the fierce maledictions of a prophet.

The demure smiles of ironists are preserved in the museums, not as everlasting art, just as a memento of unbelief.

While your blasphemous howl still resounds in a neon desert where the human tribe wanders, sentenced to unreality.

(Miłosz 1995: 37)

This poem, devoted to perhaps the most outstanding poet of the American contestation winds up Miłosz’s poetic dialogue with the counterculture, but it does not offer reconciliation. As Jerzy Jarniewicz (2013: 142–154) pointed out, the Ginsberg presented in this poem is not devoid of ambiguity. Even many years later the American revolt of the 1960s did not leave the poet indifferent.

**trans. Magdalena Buchta**

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