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“Who Would Be a Prophet”: Prophetic Aspects of Czesław Miłosz’s Poetry

„Który byłby prorokiem”. Profetyczne aspekty w poezji Czesława Miłosza

Abstract: This paper examines prophetic aspects and perspectives of poetry written by Czesław Miłosz – Polish poet of 20th century, a Nobel Prize winner. Although the poet denies readiness to become a religious figure, he serves as a prophet when he overcomes the inexpressibility of the indefinable features of religious experience. The paper presents an analysis of selected poems questioning the role of a poet and a poem in the light of the dynamic relation between the prophet and prophecy. Miłosz refuses to be God’s spokesmen but the historical context he lives in overshadows his poems and forces them to play a significant role in a broad context.

Keywords: Czesław Miłosz, contemporary prophet, indefinable

Streszczenie: Artykuł podejmuje refleksję and prorockimi/profetycznymi aspektami poezji Czesława Miłosza – polskiego poety XX wieku, zdobywcy Nagrody Nobla w dziedzinie literatury. Pomimo zaprzeczeń poety dotyczących gotowości zostania postacią religijną służy on religii jako prorok, kiedy pokonuje niewyraźność nieuchwytnych cech doświadczenia religijnego. W tekście zostaje podjęta analiza wybranych wierszy podejmujących kwestie roli poety i poezji w świetle dynamicznej relacji między prorokiem a prorocstwem. Miłosz unika stawania się rzecznikiem Boga, jednak kontekst historyczny, w którym żyje, determinuje jego wiersze i nadaje im siłę oddziaływania, by odgrywały znaczącą rolę w szerokim kontekście.

Słowa kluczowe: Czesław Miłosz, współczesny prorok, niewyraźne

When uncertainty prevails and fear is real, when its measure extends beyond the rational frame, the natural social need to follow an illuminated leader arises and attracts faithful believers who long to hear the authoritative word of God. There is a danger that those who believe themselves to have a special relationship with Yahweh are ready to satisfy such a need; however, because of various, sometimes doubtful, reasons and for equally questionable purposes, they presume to be freed of responsibility in the face of the One they claim to speak for. Pretending to know God’s intentions and to articulate his

will, judgements and decisions, they act almost as God's spokesmen. To resist the narcissistic temptation of using such extra-natural power and legitimacy appears as a unique virtue in the poetry of Polish poet Czesław Miłosz.

This paper discusses the concept of a poet as a prophet in reference to Czesław Miłosz and his poetry in the context of his life, without touching on the profound theoretical problem of poetry as prophecy in general.¹ An analysis of selected poems is presented that dispute the role of a poet and a poem in the light of the dynamic relation between the prophet and the prophecy. This article will also highlight discrepancies and limitations of the mutual identification of a poet and a prophet.

To be a prophet requires fulfilling various tasks regarded as prophetic and understood as such. These tasks include, first, representing or expressing authority, if a prophet is a leader in a non-poetic sense. Second, a prophet may be an advisor or representative of the authorities or revolutionaries, and then his or her role is to support power or to oppose it (or just the rulers). Third, a prophet may go beyond the games of power in political and social realms and claim an eternal, independent authority.

In effect, these requirements amount to prerequisites for a poet "who could be a prophet." Miłosz's poetry discussing World War II and its impact on the contemporary culture is opposed to such a role, and therefore the poet's obligations and distinctive role must be restricted to the third role mentioned above. He demonstrates his will and his choice to be a poet, stating clearly that he is not a representative of any powers of a generation or an ideological group, including a religious one. The poet denies his readiness to become a religious figure, God's spokesman or a devout example to be imitated; nevertheless, he makes efforts to overcome the inexpressibility of religious experience and this is how he fulfils his vocation. He confirms his human relationship with the living God by using straightforward and metaphorical descriptions of endeavors, misfortunes, difficulties and failures in encounters with God.

The important difference between a prophet and prophecy needs to be highlighted. The cultural paradigm of being a prophet is biblically determined in European and American society, and represents a very broad range of features defining a prophet: from the privileged position of an influential, wise and significant person, to a prophet condemned and persecuted, excluded from the society, even decapitated. One important aspect connects them all – their conceived roles are based on trust. Successful or not, a prophet gains significance as a trustworthy person.

¹ Compare, i.e. *Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of Literary Tradition*, ed. J.L. Kugel, Cornell University Press 1990; N.K. Chadwick, *Poetry and Prophecy*, Cambridge University Press 1952; R. Shoham, *Poetry and Prophecy: The Image of the Poet as a "Prophet", a Hero, and an Artist: Studies in Modern Hebrew Poetry*, BRILL 2003.

The definition of prophecy includes various elements such as the prophet’s inspired utterances, viewed as a revelation of **divine will**, a prediction of the future, made under **divine inspiration**, an **inspired message** or prediction transmitted orally or in writing,² a message of **divine truth** revealing God’s will, as well as a performed function, activity, or **charismatic endowment**.³ The common ground for all these records can be assumed to be their non-human provenience.

The question of how the adjective *divine* can be justified inevitably arises, evoking further questions about the grounds on which divinity can be sufficiently proved as adequate and true with regard to poetry and prophecy alike. Based on the presumption that prophecy has non-human provenience, a prophecy/poem can be taken as a translation, but from an indefinable source text influenced by the personality and craft of a translator – a prophet/poet. These observations lead to the conclusion that a prophet/poet is a person whom people trust and who proclaims a message that cannot be verified by them in a regular way.

My view of the prophetic dimension of Miłosz’s poetry relates to these observations: a poet as a prophet needs not only to be trustworthy, but also to be believed, and therefore a poet is expected to prove his/her credibility; secondly, poetry as prophecy is fulfilled when it is listened to/read, analyzed and discussed, and when it leads a reader beyond the already known experience. I would like to suggest that Miłosz as a poet has features of a modern prophet who is aware of already existing paradigms, including that specifically Polish romantic figure of *wieszcz*, a national seer-poet-prophet such as Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki and Cyprian Norwid. To explain the concept of *wieszcz*, one needs to refer to Mickiewicz’s lectures delivered at the Collège de France that presented his messianic philosophy of history and his views on the philosophical and religious life of the Slavs. Underlining the spiritual crisis of Western Europe dominated by a restrictive rationalism, Mickiewicz saw the spiritual depth of the Slavs as a counterbalance. He developed his ideas in *Books of the Polish Nation* and in *Books of the Polish Pilgrimage*. According to Mickiewicz, inspired by the mystic Andrzej Towiański, Poland suffered as the Christ of nations, and therefore she would redeem the world through her sufferings, which would explain the ultimate meaning of the tragedies of partitions. Mickiewicz takes history as theophany and a poet as a chosen individual, a higher spirit who is capable of receiving divine inspiration and of leading humanity towards moral rebirth, which is called “Polish messianism.”⁴

² Compare: *American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language*, Fifth Edition, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company 2016

³ *Collins English Dictionary – Complete and Unabridged*, 12th Edition, HarperCollins Publishers 2014.

⁴ See more: J. Obelkevich, L. Roper, *Disciplines of Faith: Studies in Religion, Politics and Patriarchy*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987.

His view has had a very significant impact on Polish writers and their readers alike. Miłosz seems to be well aware of the extremely high expectations towards a poet and the inherited obligations. He cannot pretend that he disregards Mickiewicz's tradition; nevertheless, he actively transforms it, offering a modern paradigm for being a poet.

Miłosz has gained the status of a significant historical figure and an authority comparable to Lech Wałęsa and John Paul II in the perception of the Poles at that time. Involuntarily, he became subsumed under the myth of a champion of national freedom, and eventually came to be moulded as a national seer-poet. Yet it is precisely from these roles that Miłosz wished to distance himself, which he repeatedly and consistently confirms.

Surprisingly, he becomes trustworthy and coherent when he reveals his frailties and doubts in a very distinctive way focused on details and things commonly regarded as of small importance in the moment of a catastrophe, as exemplified in the well-known poem entitled "A Song on Porcelain." Therefore, the prophetic dimension of his poetry lies in a specific "hope management" that expresses itself as a constant longing, a persistent quest for the meaning of existence in general, not only of particular events. There is a striking example of an image of a possible prophet in the poem, "A Song on the End of the World:"

Only a white-haired old man, **who would be a prophet**
 Yet is not a prophet, for he's much too busy,
 Repeats while he binds his tomatoes:
 No other end of the world will there be,
 No other end of the world will there be (p. 56).

The old man is not interested in taking responsibility for neither the prophecy nor his listeners. Interestingly enough, he demonstrates that he has no influence on people and he accepts this fact easily. His utterances recall those made by biblical figures, and by using parallel sentences, as well as anaphoric and cataphoric structures, he pays tribute to the poetic forms. What distinguishes him from other prophets is that he speaks from direct personal experience, as if he had already seen at least several endings of the world.

Prophetic dimension of a poet

To introduce Czesław Miłosz briefly (just to make reference to the extensive 700-page biography by Andrzej Franaszek⁵): he was a poet, novelist, essayist and translator, and won the 1980 Nobel Prize for Literature. He was born

⁵ See: A. Franaszek, *Miłosz. Biografia*, Kraków 2011.

in the village of Šeteniai, in present-day Lithuania, on 30 June 1911, and died on 14 August 2004 in Cracow, Poland. He completed his secondary school and university studies in Vilnius, Lithuania, which was then part of Poland, and received his law degree from Stefan Batory University. He entered the diplomatic service of the People’s Republic of Poland in 1945; however, he became increasingly disenchanted with the totalitarian nature of the Stalinist State and in 1951 he made the bold decision to leave Poland and seek exile in the West. Some left-wingers such as Pablo Neruda criticized his decision, and Miłosz himself felt some kind of guilt for forsaking his countrymen. He lived in Paris for 9 years, where he wrote several books in prose. In 1960, invited by the University of California, he moved to Berkeley, where he lectured as Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures for 20 years, simultaneously writing and translating; however, initially the Americans were suspicious of someone who had served for so long in a Communist government. Although his works were banned in Poland during his exile in Europe and the US, they reached Polish readers by different clandestine routes, long before he won the Nobel Prize. In 1973, the American poet Robert Hass translated Czesław Miłosz’s works and brought them for the first time into the circle of English speaking intellectuals. Until 1989, most of Miłosz’s publications were accessible in the Parisian émigré journal *Kultura* or through the underground press in Poland. Winning the Nobel Prize in 1980, however, made it possible for him to return to Poland after 30 years of absence, and it also made it possible for his works to be officially published in his home country again. During a formal ceremony in the middle of the 1990s, Miłosz was given a symbolic key to the city of Cracow and a newly renovated flat. From that time on, he divided his time between Berkeley and Cracow.

There were many reasons for a poet to act as a prophet

Miłosz grew up surrounded by many languages and religions, and being a representative of the most influential language might have put him in a role of the leader within the local community. As he was very talented and both intensively criticized and well-received by the critics from the very beginning of his career, he might have been seen as the leader of his generation. Although he co-founded the literary group “Żagary”, which gathered a circle of Vilnius fatalists in the ‘30s, he was not simply a young fatalist with a sharpened sensibility, but he perceived the very tense political atmosphere of the ‘30s and its consequences. Nevertheless, he never tried to be a leader in a political sense, and did not show much enthusiasm when in 1989 he was feted as one of Poland’s leading intellectual figures and his words were used for an inscription on the monument honouring Polish workers who had been shot by the Communist regime at the Gdansk shipyard. The inscription consisted of the following words by Miłosz:

Do not feel safe. The poet remembers.
 You can kill one, but another is born.
 The words are written down, the deed, the date (“You Who Wronged”, p. 103).

The perspective of time needs to be emphasised here in particular: a poet as an eyewitness remembers and takes notes – which constitutes a warning and a prophecy of judgment that will reach the perpetrator. In the light of this poem, being a poet seems to be enough to make one a prophet.

The poet’s great oeuvre, created over seven decades, is impossible to describe collectively and concisely. Being a poet of real sensibility and intellect, Miłosz consciously refused to represent any powers or authorities, and followed his individual path, as noted by Jan Błoński:

The Nobel Prize for Czesław Miłosz is not just a prize for his talent. It’s also a prize for **resilience and loyalty to the voice inside that led him through the obstacles of history and his own personal experiences**. Miłosz’s sentences are clear, but his poetry is dark, twisted in its richness [emphasis added by A.S.W].⁶

Prophetic dimension of poetry

Throughout his works, Miłosz consistently deepens the metaphysical aspect of his poems. He retains his multifarious perspective, while referring to the contrasts between the views of the scientific and spiritual worlds, good and evil, the survival of the weakest and evolution of the species set against religious beliefs. Miłosz also captures a very sensual beauty in nature, both wild and domesticated, describing the experience of nature as a moment of ideal joy. He consistently emphasizes the difference between a poet as a person and poetry. A poet as a fallible being like everyone else can make a mistake, but that is not his main concern. The situation is complex, as a poet may have an influence on others and is able to mislead them easily. Miłosz’s concern goes beyond the issue of a writer’s responsibility only in moral terms.

And yet Miłosz does acknowledge the writer’s ability to manipulate what life brings to us. Ethical issues come up when an individual ego encounters the eternal lyrical flame. This ego, self-love, calls for one to divide the world up into “me” and “them” to consider oneself among the chosen and to treat one’s work as a way of accumulating praise. What are the aims for writing and the goals a poet wants to achieve? Is it truly the desire to “file a record” of one’s

⁶ Quotation from J. Błoński translated by K. Dąbrowska, December 2008. Edited and updated by Agnieszka Le Nart, November 2011, <https://culture.pl/en/artist/czeslaw-milosz>, accessed: 28.09.2018.

thoughts, or is it simply a conceit? Miłosz says it’s both – there is no way to distinguish high and low nature. This is tied to a deep-seated juxtaposed feeling of guilt and a sense of superiority, as expressed in the following poem:

A Confession

My Lord, I loved strawberry jam
 And the dark sweetness of a woman’s body.
 Also well-chilled vodka, herring in olive oil,
 Scents of cinnamon, of cloves.
 So what kind of prophet am I? Why should the spirit
 Have visited such a man? Many others
 Were justly called, and trustworthy.
 Who would have trusted me?⁷ (461)

Miłosz provides a self-description that negates the image of a prophet who fasts and is as pure as driven snow, self-composed and obviously not drinking alcohol. A prophet becomes freed from the religious context and the paradigm of virtues, which supports the concept of a prophet as the chosen one not rewarded for his achievements, but rather overwhelmed with undeserved and even unwelcomed grace. Attributes such as olive oil and scents usually recognized as related to religious rituals are mentioned here as tools to satisfy the senses, to please the body, which they do quite well indeed. A poet presents himself as the one chosen, though unwillingly and presumably accidentally, to serve the Lord and to speak for the spirit. Such a self-critical description emphasizes the generosity of the vocation and God’s trust in a human being, making the last question a rhetorical one. Does he try to convince God that God has made a mistake? These lines can be taken as an example of an interiorized reading of the Scriptures confirming that God sees a man differently than fellow humans do, emphasizing the intimacy of the relationship between God and man, and also as part of a prayer echoing the poetics of the Psalms.⁸ The answer has already been given – God trusted him and now he is trying to understand and actually justify God’s decision to choose him. This situation confirms the initial hypothesis of this article: that Miłosz’s poetry exemplifies a modern experience of spirituality. This experience includes a kind of surprise in discovering that a relation with transcendence might form despite our expectations or, rather, despite what we expect to notice instantaneously. The poem *Reconciliation* looks at this way of understanding modern spirituality:

⁷ All quotations of poems from: C. Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems 1931–2001*, Penguin Classics 2005.

⁸ An interesting discussion of the problem of contemporary prophets, though not relating to Miłosz directly, can be found in R. Shoham, op. cit.

Reconciliation

Late, the time of humbling reconciliation
 With himself, arrived for him.
 “Yes” – he said – “I was created
 To be a poet and nothing more.
 I did not know anything else to do,
 Greatly ashamed but unable to change my fate” (525)

The question of shame and a sense of guilt reoccurs, but the subject is relieved by the recognition of his fate, by reconciliation not only with himself but with determinism. The prophetic dimension of this poem recalls that a human being ought to be what he was created to be and “nothing more,” which does not necessarily diminishes its importance, but is another way of saying “enough;” it suffices to be what one is created to be. The fact that humans have a right to exist the same as any other creatures brings a certain kind of pride and calmness. However, in such an explanation, the highly esteemed status of an individual as being chosen is confronted with the awareness that everything already created was equally chosen to exist. Therefore, there is no need to explain or justify why a poet or prophet exists. He or she exists as many other species do, each of them unique but equally legitimate.

The fate of a poet is to write poems, to fulfill the task given by God, who trusted him. Nevertheless, such fulfillment is not necessarily connected with the moral purity of the artist and, though art does not free him/her from moral obligations, the value of a work of art is free from the personal moral impact of its author and remains independent. Miłosz is very aware of this distinction. If God took the risk of trusting him, he is already rewarded, but he writes poems to be read by other people, which elicits the question: How to become trustworthy to them? This is a humbling and difficult situation, especially in terms of the prophetic dimension of poetry. There are readers who long for a message, and a poet has to transmit the unspeakable and the indefinable. The modern prophet distances himself from the content of the message by refusing to take the responsibility for it or by lacking concern, resulting in a betrayal and a covenant with evil, as described in the poem “Biography of an Artist:”

Biography of an Artist

And how could he do it? Knowing what we know
 About his life, every day aware
 Of harm he did to others. I think he was aware.
 Just not concerned, he promised his soul to Hell,
 Provided that his work remained clear and pure (p. 604).

And yet, to fulfil the task of being a poet, he needs some concrete signs of illuminative moments nurtured by transcendence, which is illustrated in the following poem echoing a religious hymn:

Veni Creator

Come, Holy Spirit,
bending or not bending the grasses,
appearing or not above our heads in a tongue of flame,
at hay harvest or when they plough in the orchards,
or when snow covers crippled firs in the Sierra Nevada.

I am only a human being: I need visible signs.
I tire easily, building the stairway of abstraction.
Many a time I asked, you know it well,
that the statue in church lift its hand, only once, just once, for me.
But I understand that signs must be human,
therefore, call one person, anywhere on earth,
not me-after all I have some decency-
and allow me, when I look at that person,
to marvel at you (p. 223).

This scene is crucial for understanding Pentecost, as it points out that the most intimate relation with God involves the presence of others who are also involved in their own individual, though parallel, relation with God, and as it presents religious experience as a reciprocal transmission of the indefinable (that may be reminiscent of thoughts by Buber and Levinas).

Conclusion

Miłosz refused to become a leader or to play the role of a prophet who reveals already known truths and imitates predecessors in order to be recognised and acknowledged. Instead, he preferred to ask very difficult, bold questions, and his courage was based on a strong belief that there is an answer, sense, and meaning. This belief is, for me, the most valuable prophetic dimension of his verses – not the rhetorical repetitions, imitations of biblical genres or emulations of the national Polish literary tradition. One may not grasp the meaning or interpret the prophecy adequately, but this is a result of human limitations and is not evidence of a lack of meaning, or a reason or goal. Miłosz himself appears as a next-door prophet, weak and drinking vodka, but at the same time he is an inhabitant of universal eternity, who, even though attuned to the contemporary world, remains independent and free. By distancing himself from

the witnessing of reality (from being an observer), the poet shows that contemporaneity and this particular world are only small parts of existence – moments, drops, flashes.

Miłosz's verses sometimes suggest a naked philosophical discourse of religious epiphany. The idyllic and the apocalyptic go hand-in-hand. Miłosz transcends genres, transcends the culturally established roles of a prophet and of a poet. He creates a new role for a poet as a person with a distinctive gift to transmit the indefinable and to share hope that the existence of meaning transcends human limits. His poetry breathes visual-symbolic metaphor. To paraphrase Frost's saying, "Unless you are at home in the metaphor (...) you are not safe anywhere,"⁹ Miłosz was at home in the metaphor – an appropriate place for a prophet too: a modern prophet who is sent to extract, to experience, to transpose and to carry what diverges from the biblical scheme, but who realizes its very essence. To support my conclusion, I will refer to Miłosz's reflection in the quote below.

Wherever

Wherever I am, at whatever place on earth, I hide from people the conviction that I'm not from here. It's as if I'd been sent, to extract as many colors, tastes, sounds, smells, to experience everything that is a man's share, to transpose what was felt into a magical register and carry it there, from whence I came (p. 687).

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⁹ R. Frost, *Education by Poetry*: this was a talk delivered at Amherst College and subsequently revised for publication in the *Amherst Graduates' Quarterly* of February 1931. It is from the conclusion of this piece that Robert Frost once extracted the text separately printed under the title *The Four Beliefs*, <http://www.en.utexas.edu/amlit/amlitprivate/scans/edbypo.html>, accessed: 26.09.2018.

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