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MIŁOSZ: ON CIRCUIT

Abstract: This paper undertakes a critical examination of Czesław Miłosz's negative responses to contemporary art in general, and American modernist poetry in particular. It focuses on Miłosz's interpretations of Cézanne's statements and Wallace Stevens's poems, and concludes that the Polish poet's inability and unwillingness to appreciate contemporary art results from his recognition and approval of mimetic representation as the only strategy which guarantees rationality, certainty, a sense of metaphysical hierarchy and which is informed by them. Quoted are Miłosz's somewhat angry reactions to the concepts of abstract, non-figurative art as well as his words of admiration for the representational moment apparently inherent in both poetry and painting. Parenthetically, the paper points to Miłosz's repressed feelings of existential and epistemological ambivalence, arguably the most valuable aspect of his work.

Keywords: ambivalence, modernity, abstraction, reality

1.

Let me begin with a digression. In Andrzej Franaszek's biography of Czesław Miłosz we find a brief and lively description of the poet provided by Stanisław Vincenz:

He is completely mad (...) one sentence contradicts another. I was not able to comprehend all those contradictions until I fancied an image, contradictory in itself, of an insect, a ground beetle belonging to the *Carabidae* family, pinned to the ground: its legs are running but the pin holds it down (Franaszek 2011: 499; trans. A.K-P.).

This description was sketched at the beginning of the 1950s, a period particularly difficult for Miłosz, yet it can serve as a point of departure for

an overall psychological portrait of the Polish poet, be it the 1950s or the 1990s. A bit earlier, in the 1940s, Polish novelist Jerzy Andrzejewski pointed to similar contradictions informing Miłosz's worldview. In one of his letters to the poet, Andrzejewski wrote about "two opposing visions of the world." He added: "Your intellectualism or the observer's position, as you call it, gives me the impression of anxiety in a man who is running around a furniture-cluttered room, but is unable to find a spot to sit down, thinking that none deserves his trust" (Miłosz 2009: 173, 245; trans. A.K.-P.).

Significantly, both Vincenz and Andrzejewski underlined the moment of movement, constant search, the never-ending formation of a worldview of the Polish poet. Also, they emphasised his want of a definite position as well as his fondness for strong phrases, stemming not so much from the limitations or exhaustion of language but rather from the overflow of the intellectual, existential and linguistic profusion that cannot be contained and ordered. Unable to cope with the overabundance of impressions and words describing them, and yearning for definite ideas and perspectives, the poet kept turning to new aspects of reality and realms of imagination and tried to find in them a justification for his own existence. Characteristically, he disregarded the fact that such a justification cannot be thought of independently from concrete reality.

True, Miłosz does his best to be specific. Yet, even though he succeeds to do so in his poetry, in his critical commentaries he usually falls into vague, abstract modes of discussing many things at once. He channels his critical interpretations in such a way that his arguments often contradict one other. It is probably not a question of inconsistency. The author of "Rescue" attempts to do justice to the whole of reality and unavoidably falls prey to the dream shared by every realist – that of grasping the fullness of being and expressing the thing in its "thingness." That is why he multiplies perspectives and binds together heterogeneous ideas. In this Miłosz resembles Hegel, who in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* starts from the here and now in order to move smoothly, by way of circular cancellations and uplifts, to successive stages in the history of the Absolute, where all particulars and individual attributes are ideally conciliated in the name of a few universals. The movement neutralizes all positions, perspectives, opinions and views. What counts is the vague and inaccessible goal, the truth or epiphany of reality – the rest is only a path leading towards that destination. Essential is the energy of that movement. After all, the destination is not clearly defined and the direction remains virtually unknown. The mo-

mentum itself is as important as its target. Of course, all tendencies should have a purpose. Sooner or later, though, there comes a moment when the poet is carried away by the sheer energy of the movement and the critical mumbo-jumbo ensues.

Miłosz was a creature of ambiguity. In poetry he managed to accommodate it, but in his sketches and essays he stumbled over it, scurried to and fro, finding a footing and losing it almost immediately. Undoubtedly, at their best, his critical texts are paragons of what essay writing may amount to. However, their greatness is also their curse. Once an essay by Miłosz is over, we are left with the impression of a barren, tautological circle consisting of forceful but repetitive arguments, a circuit striving to encompass all history, all humanity, all reality, but in the end encompassing only itself. End of digression.

2.

Within the space that can provisionally be called Miłosz's American space,¹ there is a curious trope essential for our understanding of the attitude and views of the Polish Nobel laureate. What I have in mind is the accusatory tone that Miłosz regularly assumes in his criticism of both 20th-century American poetry and contemporary culture and art (non-figurative painting in particular). Miłosz treats these domains indiscriminately. His criticism of contemporary poetry is quite often mixed with his condemnations of new art. His tone is decided and the allegations take the form of a totalizing

¹ Miłosz's America is one huge dilemma. His attitude towards the American continent was marked by an array of ambiguous feelings and seems to be most clearly articulated in a passage from a 1962 letter to the Wat family: "The experience of America has always baffled me beyond words. There are many layers to it: stopping at one falsifies all the others" (Wat 2005: 230; trans. A.K-P.). These sentences seem to hold true for the whole time Miłosz spent in America. At the very beginning, murkier tones and pessimism prevailed. Later, things looked a little brighter, but even in his diary entries in *A Year of the Hunter* (written between 1987 and 1988), beside the undeniable fascination, one can sense a note of alienation and longing for Europe. The descriptions of American nature teem with ambivalence: on the one hand, they are impersonal, bleak landscapes of deserts and rocky shores; on the other, they brim with flora and fauna. The poet's attitude towards American culture and civilization is equally ambiguous: he admired the resourcefulness of the first settlers but his admiration was combined with a harsh criticism of the capitalist society. It is difficult to say whether Miłosz found his feet in America. Vincenz's comparison with a ground beetle seems to me extremely accurate here.

accusation. The poet does not take into consideration individual works or gestures, neither does he try to delve into possible differences between them. He treats contemporary art as a certain whole and inscribes it into a somewhat apocalyptic scheme of time whereby the modern era becomes an age of dehumanization, degeneration and nihilism.

The perspective outlined by Miłosz is panoptic and designed to encompass the entire history of civilization. Were we to understand it, we would have to refer to Miłosz's omnipresent Gnosticism that permeates his aesthetic views and literary criticism. I can only mention here this interesting and important context, but it undoubtedly provides material for a whole book. Its potential author would have to tie together the Manichean, esoteric and aesthetic threads, bringing to light their mutual links, discussing their interrelatedness and pointing out the fact that they resonate and circulate endlessly within the bounds of the poet's eschatological vision. Miłosz inscribes his reading into a historical perspective, essentially foreclosing the possibility of a temporary, partial and accidental interpretation. This approach holds true even for his poetic epiphanies supposed to provide a breach in the historical structure of being. Significantly, Miłosz places epiphanies in the historical context reaching back to polytheism and Judaism (at the beginning of the first section of *A Book of Luminous Things* we actually read that epiphany "interrupts the everyday flow of time and enters as one privileged moment when we intuitively grasp a deeper, more essential reality"; this passage is immediately followed by remarks on the historical meaning of epiphanic experiences (Miłosz 1998: 3).

What comes to the foreground here is a negative idea of America. Miłosz's criticism is directed primarily against the poetry of Anglo-American Modernism, both in its early experimental stage and at its final high phase informed by such great poems as *The Cantos* or *Paterson* as well as by recognitions formed by the acolytes and advocates of the New Critical school. The Nobel's pessimistic vision of modernity is characteristically fused with his ambivalent approach towards American culture and civilization in general. 20th-century poetry is for Miłosz one of the main manifestations of the downfall of artistic imagination, and even though he does not mince words over post-war European literature, his bitter critical remarks on the American poets seem to me particularly symptomatic.

Miłosz's criticism of American poetry must be judged as unjustified and to a great extent incomprehensible. It is also surprising in the work of the poet who is evidently indebted to what he has discovered in the poems and manifestos of high Modernism. After all, his own poetic work comes to

similar conclusions, reaches similar diagnoses and operates by way of similar rhetoric, evoking similar reactions in its readers. Why then condemn the great poetic tradition that gave rise to such artists as Pound, Crane, Williams, Stevens, Moore or (somewhat later) Bishop and that can boast such poetic achievements as Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Crane's *The Bridge*, Stevens's long poems or Williams's *Paterson*?² Why criticize something so close and familiar to one's own tastes and artistic gestures?

Miłosz's harshly critical stance was not a coincidence. On the contrary, it grew out of his strong belief in the dehumanization and degeneration of contemporary art, which in turn stemmed from earlier processes, most importantly from the crises within Christianity and the emergence of the scientific paradigm. In this context his criticism of Anglo-American modernism was only one facet of the overall critique of 20th-century art, particularly experimental art that elaborated on the discoveries of impressionism (in painting) and French symbolism (in poetry). Miłosz repeatedly refers to the negative genealogy of modern and postmodern art: not being able to compete with the scientific paradigm, poetry and painting have adopted scientific or pseudo-scientific methods, separating themselves from collective experiences and turning into marginal disciplines cut away from reality and thus difficult to grasp.

Since Miłosz recognizes that the weakness of contemporary poetry is due to the crisis of art in general, a discussion with his theses has to be global and must take into consideration the overall negative meaning and implications of his statements on poetry, painting and occasionally on 20th-century music (although here he seems to tread with more caution). The poet seems unwavering in his assumption that any serious argument on the state of modern art has to include a gnostic vision of the world, a critical assessment of post-Cartesian and post-Enlightenment culture, a questioning of experimental as well as avant-garde poetry and prose. Importantly, in his own comments on contemporary American and European literature Miłosz rarely abandoned a broader and universal perspective embracing

² The full analysis of numerous parallels between Miłosz's poetry and modernist projects falls outside the scope of this article. Importantly, many poems written by Miłosz after World War II seem heavily indebted to such authors as Eliot, Auden or Jeffers. It is hard to overlook the fact that Miłosz followed the patterns set by the great modernists (especially in his long poems). He was also familiar with the modernist concepts of impersonal poetry and, like modernists, voiced his preference for the anti-symbolic poem concentrating on the hard, palpable texture of things. It should be immediately noted, however, that the parallels are also parallaxes – and it is them that I want to point out in my essay.

religious views, psychological and social constraints as well as historical and political contexts.

One cannot help asking more or less obvious questions, though. Is it **really** true that contemporary art has strayed away from the primary existential and epistemological experiences and has moved towards metadiscourses rooted in science or pseudoscience? Can one imagine a reliable position from which such a judgment may be passed? Have we **really** witnessed a radical change of paradigm? And, most significantly, is it not the case that Miłosz's dream of the "second space" (title of his important volume), the space of imagination and spirit, turns into a strongly paradigmatic and in fact scientific narrative with clearly articulated ideas of the order of subject and object, the me and the not-me, the perception and the perceiving consciousness? Has this critic managed to eschew the rhetorical effects he condemns? Such questions cannot be answered positively. Miłosz himself rarely dealt with them and never tried to address them in a critical mode (although we find answers in his best poems). All in all, the problem with the Polish poet is due not so much to the fact that he criticized modernity but rather to the fact that his violent critique was self-contradictory, as it revived the very paradigms it questioned so vehemently.

3.

Noteworthy in this context is Miłosz's encounter with the poetry and critical writings of Wallace Stevens. The subject is immense, and it allows wide margins of uncertainty. I can only touch upon the issue whose explication and analysis would require a much greater degree of critical attention and energy. It is, pointedly, not only the question of two individual poets, but also the problem of two clashing visions of poetry and opposing cartographies of the self. It is the mapping out of the trajectories almost parallel but never quite overlapping: rather, the trajectories wide apart.

We now know that in the 1940s Miłosz took meticulous notes on the margins of Stevens's writings.³ For a long time, however, he did not express his opinion on the American poet. It is also difficult to discover in

³ At present the notes are stacked in the Beinecke Library. Most of them were written in the 1950s and concern Stevens's critical volume *The Necessary Angel* (I would like to express my gratitude to Ewa Kołodziejczyk, who provided me with the information and sent me a copy of an unpublished article written by Miłosz in 1948).

any of Miłosz's poems even a single trace of the poetic idiom characteristic of the Hartford recluse. Only in a 1989 conversation with Joseph Brodsky Miłosz was in a way summoned to answer: "Wallace Stevens is a complete mystery to me. I am full of conflicting feelings about him. He fascinates and repulses me at the same time, so my attitude towards him is very ambivalent" (Miłosz 2011: 391; trans. A.K.-P.). Ambivalence again! In two later comments included in the Polish edition of the anthology *A Book of Luminous Things*, Miłosz takes a more critical stance. When introducing his translation of *The Poems of Our Climate*, he announces:

Describing things not for their own sake, but in order to make them serve our own purposes is disloyal: it is already an abstraction or theory that Cézanne hated so much in painting, as he demanded the entire attention to be directed at the secret of the thing in itself. I do not think that the following poem by Stevens discusses a porcelain bowl and carnations, as its subject matter is creativity, poetry. He only seems to write about reality, whereas in fact the text is a self-reflexive poem. I am not going to conceal my distaste both for this whole dirty business and for Stevens's poetry (Miłosz 1994: 85; trans. A.K.-P.).

And another passage:

He was definitely a 20th-century poet, which is to say that he thought all the beliefs and religious tenets of humankind to be a supreme fiction. Only art, which for him meant poetry, remained as a great fantasy of our species that we weave out of ourselves like a silkworm spinning its thread. Still, Stevens lived entirely under the rule of the scientific worldview of his time and his examination of the visible world is marked by the influence of the scientific method (Miłosz 1994: 87; trans. A.K.-P.).

For the admirers and attentive readers of Stevens's poetry, these revelations might come as a great surprise. After all, Stevens insisted more than once that he wrote on behalf of reality, and that all his poetic effort was directed at exhausting the rhetorical potential of language, which only then, after coming to its limits, may venture to represent "things as they are" (the phrase is a refrain of the 1937 poem "The Man with the Blue Guitar"). The sentence concerning Stevens's surrender to the influence of the scientific paradigm is barely comprehensible. Stevens continued the traditions of romantic poetry and transcendental philosophy, repeatedly and convincingly dismantling Cartesian, post-Cartesian and Enlightenment discourses and narrations; the spirit of parody and pastiche visible in his poems is most

often directed against the language associated with the poetics of scientific positivism, realism and logic.⁴

Let us note another contradiction in Miłosz's comments, a contradiction that can be found in many of his statements and has rarely been used in discussions on his views of poetry and its role in the contemporary world. As it is, the poet's obsessively repeated call for objectivity is permeated with the scientific rhetoric which implies that we can separate reality and language, and that the latter is transparent. Paradoxically, Miłosz's comments tend to reproduce the Cartesian separation of the matter (substance, material substrate, spoken or printed word) and the spirit (meaning, sense, message). This idea is also traceable in the mimetic notion of literary transmission – the reality becomes the object of description and experience, and therefore is removed into a distance, thus becoming obscured by the universe of signs that were supposed to bring it closer. What we have here is a closed circuit of argumentation which seems to be convincing when it stands on its own but which incessantly repeats its own movement, distancing itself from any reality.

One wants to protest. There is no innocent, pure, unequivocal language. Every single sentence is subjected to rhetorical distortion. This is true especially in the case of those statements which in the name of the hypothetical purity of the medium try to question their own rhetorical status. It is here that the most serious gap opens between the opinions of the modernists

⁴ Let me mention in passing another dimension of contemporary art overlooked by Miłosz: the sphere of play and disinterestedness. The latter appears in Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, a book not taken into consideration by Miłosz. When Miłosz writes about "reality (...) demanding a hero, but (...) also (...) an organizing idea" (1992: 112), when he demands from a poem "mental articulatedness" (1990: 143; trans. A.K.-P.), when he describes it as "an expression of universal experiences" (1990: 29; trans. A.K.-P.) and perceives in it "a mimetic expression of truth" (1990: 75; trans. A.K.-P.), he pursues a definition of poetry as a kind of marketable art: it is always supposed to be beneficial, as it would be unthinkable to have the idea of poetry whose sole rationale for existence was in itself. Here perhaps Miłosz's Manichaeism (understood as a belief that the world around us is an obstacle to overcome, and therefore to be used as a tool) is most truly revealed. At this level, selflessness and disinterestedness are unacceptable, as they presuppose a moment of approval and acceptance: we do not want to gain anything, but rather identify ourselves with reality and accept our own lives. In this context it would be very interesting to compare Miłosz with Beckett, the master of free and profitless interplay of signs and gestures, and above all with Simone Weil, who bears the comparison with the Polish poet on a much deeper level. Stevens also alludes to Weil and mentions her notion of "decreation" several times in his post-World War II texts: this Cézannean term opens up the space for yet another discussion that I continue elsewhere (Gutorow 2008 and 2009: *passim*).

and the theses voiced by the Polish poet. One of the most recognizable features of the poems written by Stevens and by other advocates of Anglo-American modernism is a strong awareness of the rhetorical ambivalence of language. In stark contrast to them, Miłosz defended unequivocality and literality. His ideal was a literal and transparent utterance. I am far from claiming that the Polish poet was striving for a scientific representation of reality. But it is hard not to notice that his appeals for a simple and immediate poetic message reconstruct traditional aporias they attempt to overcome.

Furthermore, one can compare Miłosz's and Stevens's opinions of the late impressionistic paintings of Cézanne. As is well known, Cézanne was one of Stevens's favourite painters. Miłosz admired the painter, too, but for radically different reasons. In his preface to *A Book of Luminous Things* he refers to the well-known and popular biography of Cézanne written by the painter's friend Joachim Gasquet. He pays special attention to the passages where the French artist is presented as a eulogist of nature and a maker trying to imitate reality in the most accurate way. Let me quote three characteristic statements by Cézanne that were cited by Gasquet and then repeated by Miłosz: "My method, my code of rules, is realism" (Gasquet 1991: 170); "whatever I may do, I cannot get rid of the notion that this tree is a tree, this rock a rock, this dog a dog" (Gasquet 1991: 162); and "a minute in the life of the world passes. To paint that minute in its precise reality! Forgetting everything else for its sake. To become that minute. To be, in other words, the sensitized plate. To convey the image of what we see, forgetting everything that appeared before" (Gasquet 1991: 154).

The reason why the author of *Three Winters* chose exactly these sentences is obvious – they do convey the sense of the mimetic pact so dear to the Polish poet. Miłosz's Cézanne is a stubborn verist who shies all the novelties and avant-garde inclinations and rejects languages of modernity. He also continues the tradition developed by such artists as Constable or Courbet. This Cézanne is an artist consciously situating himself on the junction between two developmental lines present in European 19th-century painting: hard realism aiming at the creation of ideal copies versus romantic transcendentalism that penetrates reality and searches within it for the ultimate, irrefutable reason for existence. According to Miłosz, it is not the impressionists but Cézanne that comes to draw definite conclusions from the intersection of these two currents; the transcendent gaze of

the painter does not stop at the perception of things but creates objective analogues of things.

Is this a pertinent interpretation? There is not one single answer to such a question. Obviously, the Provençal recluse might be called a painter of reality. What is not so clear, however, is how he perceived the status and mode of representation. What does it mean to “render reality” in a painting? Is it not the case that the artistic accuracy is in its essence the accuracy on the part of the observing consciousness? Is the latter subjective or objective? Polish art critic Wiesław Juszcak rightly highlights the multidimensional nature of Cézanne’s work and difficulties with characterizing it: “so far, the interpretation of this art has been insufficient on many levels, and one thing is certain – it will never be brought to a definite conclusion” (Juszcak 1985: 189; trans. A.K.-P.). Already in Gasquet’s book we encounter numerous statements that complicate the vision of Cézanne as a painter of nature. Think, for example, of the famous sentence which is his artistic creed of sorts: “Painting from nature is not copying the object, it is realizing sensations” (Gasquet 1991: 46). It is not an exceptional or incidental statement, as Cézanne’s late paintings concentrate on the search for the essence of phenomena and on the consistent march towards abstract art, or at least the kind of art that would reveal the mechanics and laws of our perception. Cézanne does not keep it secret that the search for reality must involve a reconstruction of the represented world – and this is where he ceases to function as a convenient argument in the discussion on the superiority of the mimetic pact. As Juszcak adds, “the trace of this shared principle of reconstruction is in the shape and the rhythm of the patch of colour, the hidden geometry of solids, the breach of the perspectivist conventions” (Juszcak 1985: 195; trans. A.K.-P.). Starting with an intuition of the object, the one informed by numerous perceptions, the French painter arrives at cubism and abstraction, lines and shapes. Here is a world that demands yet another restatement.

What is questioned here is not the existence of reality but the status of perception with all its dilemmas and aporias. Moreover, the moment of activism and participation inherent in the reconstruction of the represented world allows for a more complete relationship with the so-called reality. Cézanne’s reconstruction does not distort reality. On the contrary, it brings it closer. After all, reality is not a static object of observation (as the Cartesian or Enlightenment models would assume) but a part of ourselves; the part that undergoes constant changes and therefore demands an entirely differ-

ent approach. It is quite astonishing that Miłosz, who obsessively traced the signs of the scientific paradigm in contemporary culture, would at the same time defend the dualistic mode of cognition, where the cognizable and the cognizant are two static, stable, inherently identical qualities. It would be easy to demonstrate that such an objectification of the cognitive process comes very close to the model that might be called the scientific paradigm.

4.

Cézanne's lesson: contemporary art should be a reconstruction of the represented world, "a passionate pursuit of the Real," in Miłosz's own words (I'm referring to his Harvard lecture "The Lesson of Biology," 1983: 56). The phenomenological interpretation of Cézanne's aesthetics will follow exactly this lead. Accordingly, in his well-known texts Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that the originality of the French painter resided in the new mode of perception of reality. Instead of imitating it in, say, a primitivist or naturalist fashion, or rendering subjective feelings and perceptions as the impressionists did, the painter should be able to demonstrate how things become things, even before they have become concrete objects and before we have discerned them from the surrounding reality. Cézanne's greatness would reside in his ability to doubt the world around him, as well as in his ingenuity in revealing the process during which the chaotic mass of shapes and colours becomes the "world" to us. Only the painter is able to see the bare texture of things. As Polish critic Jacek Migasiński writes on the margin of Ponty's texts,

one looks at things without any obligation to evaluate them (...) they are not the objects of cognition or action. One's unprejudiced attitude sets one free from them and the whole world, that is, a direct access to them is gained by means of attentive eyes and the painting hand (1995: 68; trans. A.K.-P.).

I cannot engage here into a more extensive analysis of the phenomenological interpretation of Cézanne's painting, so let me cite a few sentences:

The painter's vision is not a view upon the *outside*, a merely "physical-optical" relation with the world. The world no longer stands before him through representation; rather, it is the painter to whom the things of the world give birth by a sort of concentration or coming-to-itself of the visible (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 181).

And:

seeing is not a certain mode of thought or presence to self; it is the means given me for being absent from myself, for being present from within at the fission of Being only at the end of which do I close up into myself (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 186).

One more passage:

We are so fascinated by the classical idea of intellectual adequation that painting's mute "thought" sometimes leaves us with the impression of a vain swirl of significations, a paralyzed or miscarried utterance (...) this disappointment issues from that spurious fantasy which claims for itself a positivity capable of making up for its own emptiness (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 189).

I do not quote Merleau-Ponty to question or invalidate Miłosz's interpretation. As it has already been mentioned, Cézanne's paintings and commentaries can be read in many different ways. It is just to prove that the unfortunate equation of modernity and unintelligibility completely misses the mark. Modern art is by all means intelligible, it just needs to be experienced and interpreted at the level of a direct sensation, stripped from the teleological and metaphysical perspective imposed by consciousness. Incomprehensibility? No, it is rather a lack of readiness to accept the world the way it appears in everyday experience and one's unwillingness to abandon a vision of the organized and circular world (remember, we are discussing a certain circuit, a tautological rotation of ontological and eschatological narratives).

Just like Cézanne seen from the phenomenological angle, the American poets of the modernist turn tried to come closer to reality with the full awareness of the open-endedness and inconclusiveness of the process, realizing that the path of a simple, direct experience can indeed meander. Sooner or later we come across the question of the limits and power of language. Is a perceiving consciousness not a part of what it perceives? If so, should it not abandon the schematic division into the cognizing subject and the object of cognition? Does not the idea of the "mimetic pact" involve an imitation of reality in its most radical forms? What about so-called realist art? Is it not a typical manifestation of the scientific consciousness that strives for the objectification of our cognition and a discovery of some irrefutable truths and unequivocal meanings? These are just several of many questions that Miłosz did not try or did not want to cope with.

5.

When one reads great Modernist poets, it becomes apparent how much importance they attach to the moment of participation and coexistence. Language is for them not only a medium but also an aspect and a part of the world which it tackles. A work of art loses its abstract dimension and becomes concrete, corporal, singular, made real by its very presence. As Archibald MacLeish wrote in the poem “Ars Poetica”: “A poem should not mean/ But be” (1985: 106). This imperative would be whole-heartedly embraced by Stevens, for whom poetry was a part of the world and not its exposition or paraphrase. Since the very beginning of his poetic career Stevens underlined the fact that the poet, like the painter, does not express reality but participates in the process of its becoming here and now; he does not follow it but discovers it within oneself, in one’s own life, and in others.⁵

⁵ Examples are manifold. At the time when he was composing poems that would form his first collection, Stevens was most intent on obtaining the desired sound and musical effects – the sound of language became not only a quality in itself but formed a part of the poem’s message, occasionally supplanting the meaning of individual sentences, metaphors and images. Just like Eliot, Stevens was initially influenced by French Symbolists. If we were to follow Miłosz’s terminology, we would have to describe the poems included in *Harmonium* in terms of deviation and degeneration. The question is whether such a direct description would be possible. I do not think so. Even in those poems where the word play and the importance of sound seem to turn into pure poetic play, the poet has a specific purpose in mind. A good example of this strategy is “The Comedian as the Letter C,” one of the most significant poems of *Harmonium*. The language of the poem is that of overwhelming sophistication, and the meaning of its individual words is stifled by the effects of the poet’s flamboyant style: the melody of the sentence seems to be more important than its message. Is the world of the poem unreal? Yes, if we assume that reality is a certain construct of consciousness. No, if we believe – and this is precisely the subject of Stevens’s poem – that consciousness is a part of reality understood as a process of becoming itself without end. Ornate language reflects well the tribulations of a sensibility that does not stop at individual experiences and does not divide them into epiphanies but takes the world in *en masse*, in all its chaotic richness.

An important context is provided by Stevens’s 1937 sequence “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” whose title refers to a painting by Picasso. Both the painting and the poem are variations on the idea of Cézanne’s reconstruction of the world achieved by its unmaking, decreation and the never-ending process of reassembly. From the perspective of Miłosz’s notion of art, both works should be considered as deviant acts devoid of any firm footing and stripped of a “metaphysics of form” (the term taken from Miłosz’s important essay “Punkt widzenia, czyli o tak zwanej drugiej awangardzie” [A Point of View: On So-called Second Avant-garde]; 1990: 148). Miłosz does not notice how closely form and reality are tied in Picasso

In contrast, Miłosz's ideal poem – a faithful representation of reality – seems to make sense only against the backdrop of the scholastic and Cartesian separation of the body and the thinking substance. It loses its truth and efficacy once the model exhausts itself, and this is what usually happens to binary models. Much of what we call modern poetry, and I guess Anglo-American Modernism is a special case here, seems to have realized this. That is why it distanced itself from any grand narratives and concentrated on the medium of language – not to turn reality into a play of signifiers but to let it be and not just announce itself by way of signs. Miłosz does not seem to notice that avant-garde movements not only did not betray reality but actually wanted to render reality in its full, moving beyond the division into the body, consciousness and the world. Hence his problem with the understanding of the modernist sensibility that appeared as a reaction to the Cartesian model of cognition and human being.

As a matter of fact, Miłosz never believed in poetry as a self-fulfillment. In his important poem “Meaning” we have the key image of a voice cruising in endless circles:

there will remain
A word wakened by lips that perish,
A tireless messenger who runs and runs
Through interstellar fields, through the revolving galaxies,
And calls out, protests, screams.

(Miłosz 2006: 569)

There is something nightmarish about this image, a silent confession of the impossibility of overcoming the tautology of the “self,” a constant

and Stevens. Deformation and transformation of reality belong not only to the sphere of artistic creativity, but first and foremost have a metaphysical and existential dimension: they are most metaphysical since the question of being implies temporality and an inevitable chasm between the thing itself and its phenomenon; they are also existential since one's consciousness is trapped in that chasm. Miłosz's acceptance of the mimetic pact is nothing else but a confirmation and a proclamation of the gap between consciousness and the world. Picasso and Stevens take an opposite approach as they subvert the mimetic order, which allows them to open art to the possibility of meaning beyond meaning, beyond language, and this by the very fact of the metonymic re-integration with reality, or rather processes that we call reality.

The vision of the world in Stevens's late works is touched by the tragic, but we never find there any Manichean inclinations: what is tragic is not the world we live in, but the consciousness that cannot find within the world a place for itself; in turn, the aim of art is not to imitate the order of the world organized by consciousness (as we know, Miłosz repeatedly and obsessively writes about the need to preserve hierarchy), but to go beyond the circle of sensibility mistaking its own tragic condition for the condition of the world.

elevation of oneself to the status of reality. The poem highlights Miłosz's tight hold on the figure and figurativeness of his own language, as if it were impossible to get away from it, as if everything had to be literal and expressed verbatim. Modern art opposes literality and this is the source of its ambiguity. It is impossible not to notice that at the same time it forms a kind of protest, but the protest is directed against the oversimplifications and the dialectic roundness of the Enlightenment mind. This is something Miłosz could not or would not accept. In his poems we find moments of self-doubt but these are always accompanied by a vision of a true, undisputed, imperial "I" that constitutes the primary criterion for the poetry which by necessity is imitative and subordinated to an invisible hierarchy. There is no way out of this vicious circle, because the warranty of reality is the self-identical self, conceivable only as a tightly closed reality.

It should be noted that Miłosz himself disapproved of the realist conventions at least several times. In his essay "Immortality of Art" the argument starts as follows:

The condition of strong art is its connection with reality, which cannot be interpreted after the 19th-century fashion. We know that the art of the written word presents its durability as mimesis also in those spaces where it seems to run away from it, even if it is not visible all at once (Miłosz 1991: 170; trans. A.K.-P.).

Later Miłosz speaks of "a historical mutation," that is, the fact that realism is historical and cannot be approached as a universal artistic method. Describing Kafka's works he claims that the "so-called realistic description had come to its end because it is possible only when there is an individual endowed (...) with an orbit [environment, social context, etc.] of his own" (Miłosz 1992: 160). New art assumes that we do not act ourselves: it is language that acts through us, and we are acted upon, we are written down.

Let us dismiss the fact that in his reasoning Miłosz introduces a simplified opposition between activism (artist describing reality) and passivity (artist as a medium), thus disregarding the possibility of transitional states. I am more interested in the fact that, already in the next paragraph, the Polish poet hurriedly backs out of his previous words and writes about the necessity of resistance "in the name of reality." He adds:

Of course, by bringing in reality, I expose myself to many misunderstandings; years in a seminar in philosophy would not exhaust the implications contained

in the term mimesis. Also, I risk inviting the phantom of realism together with all the epithets usually accompanying it (Miłosz 1992: 161).

Indeed, Miłosz's argumentation is nothing else but an instinctive reactivation of the mimetic pact. Forgetting about his earlier reservations against naive realism, the poet returns to his starting point. He does so from the position of someone who realizes the hazards of the mimetic mode, yet this realization does not alter his perspective in the least; neither does it preclude his further criticism of modernity and its languages. Miłosz mentions the "specter of realism," and rightly so, but by questioning the legitimacy of the realism of the 19th-century novel, he definitely undermines his own position. Miłosz's realism is often spectral and hallucinogenic, and many of his poems create an effect similar to that which we sometimes associate with the reception of hyper-realistic works: the imitation is so accurate that any traces of the convention are lost, and yet the gesture of imitation itself turns out to be hyper-conventional and artificial precisely because what has been suppressed returns with a much greater force.

Superiority of Miłosz as a poet over Miłosz as a critic resides, among other things, in the fact that as a poet Miłosz often (unfortunately not always) felt exempt from the obligation to put forward unequivocal, emphatic theses. As a result, his best poems are open to the possibility of varied, sometimes contradictory, readings. I do not need to add that this is in effect something Anglo-American modernists were also striving for. The main difference would consist in their awareness of the inevitable deformation of the linguistic space, as well as in their realization that any efforts to contain undisputed, straightforward messages in poetic speech are not only futile but also counterproductive; the language that has been forced into unequivocality falls into a vicious circle of repetition of the same signs and contexts. In Miłosz's case this awareness is silenced: it bores into the texture of many of his poems but never takes the form of an open declaration. On the contrary, he suppresses the thought of the subversive potential inherent in language, rhetoric and conventions, obsessively directing against it the blade of his criticism. But realism that he privileges is able to give us only as much as has been given to it: a world of a certain "self," existing here and now, at the moment of speaking. Nothing more or, to repeat the title of Miłosz's famous poem, "no more."⁶

⁶ The poem "No more" originally published in the volume *Gucio zaczarowany (Bobo's Metamorphosis)* is worth a separate analysis. The motif of poetic impotence is exceptional

If, therefore, we can at all speak of a lesson of any kind that can be derived from Miłosz's statements on modernist poetry in particular and modern art in general, the lesson would be negative. On the one hand, it would involve Miłosz's lack of agreement with the polyphonic nature of literary expression (what comes here to my mind are his remarks on the "posed voice of Polish literature"⁷); on the other hand, it would provide us with something like an overexposed photo effect discernible in many of his essays – we can see an outline of some constructions and structures that make us think of the self and not of reality, which is present only as a vague suggestion.

This found its culmination in the idea that only by engaging ourselves in an immediate and realistic representation of reality can we prevent the horror of dissemination. It is in this arrested moment that I find Miłosz just as he wanted to see himself: a poet of reality, indeed, but the reality that is perceived and contemplated, not a never-ending process of becoming or a construction of the self, of one's identity, and of relationships with others. It is the position of an observer who conscientiously follows the conventions informing the scholastic and Cartesian idea of the strict separation of consciousness and its object, the psychic and the bodily, language and reality. In Miłosz's world everything is brought to a halt for a moment and is outlined with a thick contour, as if the poet were afraid that the whole circle would break and go haywire. In fact, it is not so much a circle but a looping of the self, an imagination in a neutral gear willing to bolt into the world but forced into immobility – one great circuit.

trans. Anna Kowalcze-Pawlik

in Miłosz's *oeuvre*. Regrettably, it was not developed in his later works.

⁷ What I have in mind is Miłosz's essay "Mickiewicz" published in the Polish volume *Ogród nauk* (The Garden of Knowledge), where he contrasts "posed voice" with "perversities of language" (1991: 141, trans. A.K.-P.). It is therefore worth quoting the passage in which he connects the effects common for both language and painting: "When we stand in front of a painting in a museum, I cannot know what the man next to me sees in it: perhaps he perceives something entirely different from what I do. Similarly, it is possible to check in a very limited degree how our neighbour understands and interprets a page lined with poetry or prose. But all the differences in the modes of reception of the word or the line and colour get multiplied, and here we are: my neighbour and I, inhabiting two different worlds, but pretending we live in one. It is possible that this is pertinent for the reception of language as such and the whole of culture, which means that I whisper out Polish sentences in a way that is different from that of others, and that whatever is beautiful for some may be ugly for me, and vice versa" (1991: 143, trans. A.K.-P.).

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