Przekładaniec. Between Miłosz and Milosz 25 (2011): 59–79
10.4467/16891864ePC.13.016.1205

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MIŁOSZ'S BIOLOGY LESSON

Abstract: Over the years *Visions from San Francisco Bay* (1969) has proven to be essential both to Miłosz's life and to his writings. It was there that he formulated, for the first time with such a force, the theses that would later reappear regularly in his essays and poetry. One vital aspect of the intellectual construction outlined in *Visions* was the concept of Nature. Miłosz proposed a "presentistic" approach, arguing for the concept of Nature as an indispensable element of contemporary thought. His reflections were restricted to motifs closely related to his theses about Nature: Nature and beauty, human/animal relations, and the theory of evolution.

Keywords: Miłosz, anthropology, Nature, human/animal relations, theory of evolution

1.

"Jestem tu" (Miłosz 1989: 5) –"I am here" (Miłosz 1983: 3). The personal pronoun in Polish is only implied, the place yet unspecified. I and the world. Perhaps: I in relation to the world. Or rather, as the reader learns later, I **facing** the world. This is the initial formulation of *Visions from San Francisco Bay*. From this unsophisticated – one may say, cognitively unpromising – antithesis, Miłosz derives the entire anthropology expounded in his book.

One crucial element of the intellectual construct presented so expressively in *Visions* is the notion of Nature, usually capitalised as if to stress its role in Miłosz's argumentation. No matter how we interpret *Visions* today, Nature undoubtedly ranks high among the dominant subjects of Miłosz's investigations. This overrepresentation was immediately noticed by Miłosz's friend Józef Sadzik, who wrote soon after the book's publica-

tion: "First of all, light is thrown on Nature. I would say that the book is a treatise on Nature" (2004: 1; trans. A.S.).[1]

Formally, *Visions* can hardly be called a treatise, since its structure is digressive, meandering and kaleidoscopic, but behind these diverse deliberations there is one controlling idea. Nature enters the opening chapters *fortissimo* and then returns with a varying intensity, sometimes directly, sometimes in disguise. If this interpretation is correct, we may begin with reconstructing the main contexts in which the notion is used, with examining its associations, because the dark semantics of Nature seems the key to the philosophical anthropology outlined in the book.

2.

To a stranger from a distant country ("I come from a place without automobiles, bathrooms, or telephones;" Miłosz 1983: 36), Nature appears first in its diverse inanimate forms. With its peculiar geographical situation, California provides an excellent vantage point to observe Nature's marvels. It is a borderland in a double sense: the farthest West, bordering on the ocean, and an expanse split through the middle by a natural boundary, a fault, "the deepest on the continent" (Miłosz 1983: 194).

The first, and overwhelming, impression may be that of an immense space painfully irreconcilable with the human size. The Californian experience is an experience of Nature in excess, in geological ecstasy, in gargantuan hypertrophy of its innumerable forms: "empty hills banked up to the horizon" (Miłosz 1983: 7); Crater Lake with its inaccessible steep shores devoid of vegetation, a "geological caprice" (Miłosz 1983: 15) defying human pragmatism; towering redwood forests where "[s]mall human figures are diminished not by the redwoods' trunks, too huge for comparisons, but by a lower level, in relation to ferns larger than a man and to the fallen, moss-covered logs which sprout new green shoots" (Miłosz 1983: 14); or Death Valley, the dried-out bed of a salt lake, where silence is "so mighty it reverberates with the shifting sands in the dunes, the crunch of the petrified salt underfoot" (Miłosz 1983: 15).

[1] The review comes from Józef Sadzik's private archive; it was not published in the author's lifetime.

Faced with those primal forms of Nature, Miłosz discovers the lack of even the most elementary bonds, of the smallest affinity between them and himself. The scale is wrong, a common language is missing, and foreboding silence swallows the human voice like a stone dropped into a well. Inanimate Nature appears to the viewer as the domain of radical otherness, stony indifference and insurmountable strangeness. Ultimately, it turns out to be a senseless emanation of chaos, a habitat of mindlessness, an asemantic abyss of forms and elements where order and meaning can be imposed only by the human mind. In this vision, Nature is not a protective and trustworthy Mother but an evil Stepmother, insensitive to human yearnings and expectations.

Human beings who experience the enormous pressure from the outside and the inside (from hostile resistant Nature and from debasing biology culminating in death and bodily decay) live their whole life in that outrageous trap. Nature is not an impartial player, a loyal ally of the human species. Perhaps for that reason Miłosz can justify human conquest of the natural world: "I am prepared to accept (…) the sight of man destroying nature" (1983: 148).[2] These are shocking words when uttered by a former naturalist, but they conform to the entirety of his mental construct. The conquest of Nature – a part, as Miłosz indicates, of human destiny (a reflection of the Biblical command "replenish the earth, and subdue it;" Gen 1: 28) – has the opposite effect as well: the victim takes vengeance on its violator. On the one hand, "subduing" Nature has led to the construction of its civilized double, a second Nature "which to its members appears to be Nature itself, endowed with nearly all the features of that other nature" (Miłosz 1983: 68), equally alien and hostile.[3] On the other hand, Nature's revenge consists in the hypertrophy of corporality and in the growing expansion of the sexual myth. Paradoxically, the more we strive to rid ourselves of the natural heritage, the deeper it affects us, as if to confirm the

[2] But in the following sentences, as if to temper those harsh words, Miłosz laments over the wasteful logging of the Californian redwoods: "A lover of the forest, I turn my eyes away from the hideous destruction on the mountain slopes where the saws have passed. The ecological balance destroyed, this forest will never grow back. Or was that part of the cost, too?" (1983: 148).

[3] "The very body of a person, whether he be educated or not, recoils from a cold, brilliant, perfectly consistent slab of metal, glass, concrete, or synthetic materials which cannot be embraced by sight or touch, and it recoils from the power residing behind that armor, as well" (Miłosz 1983: 67).

psychoanalytical discovery that the denied element returns with redoubled strength.

The bonds between humans and animals, the animate emanation of Nature, are an illusion: "[t]he enigmatic quality of our relationship to the bear – fond affection mixed with fear, the ancient tribal ritual of apologizing after killing one, children's furry teddy bears. Our playful liking for raccoons" (Miłosz 1983: 16). Some closeness between species must not be confused with likeness or, *horribile dictu*, with essential identity. Theirs is not our world. The human mind contemplating the animal existence perceives no sense in its biologically determined duration, no shred of the semiotic. Animalness itself is not accessible to us (cf. the unanswered question "What is jayness?;"[4] Miłosz 1983: 20), and all we know about it turns out to be a projection of human categories on nonhuman creatures. We have nothing to do with them, or they with us. There is an ontological gulf between us – strangeness, otherness, indifference. In our attempts to understand animals, Miłosz suggests, we run into an insurmountable barrier dividing the species. Such a conclusion put forward by an erstwhile naturalist carries some weight.

Despite more or less perceptible ties with other animals, despite the biological organism that makes humans, to some extent, "the kin of the butterfly and the crab" (Miłosz 1983: 175), man is a freak of Nature. This is not a mere hackneyed expression. Miłosz speaks no less unequivocally here than when giving his opinion on inanimate Nature: human animalness, though real, belongs to the domain of accidents; substantially, we remain outside animal categories. Humans are a separate species, by their very nature condemned to loneliness among other living beings.

Despite all the kinships with the animal world, human nature is radically different because it is twofold. It is this internal fissure, this irredeemable split that sets us apart. As Miłosz explains: "Consciousness, intelligence, light, grace, the love of the good – such subtle distinctions are not my concern; for me it is enough that we have some faculty that makes us alien, intruders in the world, solitary creatures unable to communicate with crabs, birds, animals" (1983: 175–176). And, paradoxically, this uniquely human quality, variously named, contributes to the cosmic alienation of human beings, their total isolation in the world of Nature.

[4] It may be a repetition of the famous "What is magpiety?" from Miłosz's poem "Magpiety" (1999: 129).

This is how Miłosz perceives human beings: as alien to trees, rocks and the ocean, exotic to the crab, the butterfly, the jay… His aphoristic assessment of the human condition leaves no room for doubt: "enmity was established between us and nature" (Miłosz 1983: 176).

Surrounded by the natural world, human beings differ considerably from characters in Caspar David Friedrich's paintings, for they are not solitary wanderers keeping elegant silence in the face of pantheistic Nature. The picture Miłosz paints is much more dramatic. Here, Nature seems essentially dumb, absurd (i.e. "senseless" or "deaf," as in Latin *absurdus*), nonhuman or even anti-human. All these expressions converge in the image of the ocean, which is probably the most emblematic figure Miłosz uses to describe the natural world. When discussing Robinson Jeffers' superior attitude to the human civilisation and his admiration for awe-inspiring Nature, Miłosz writes polemically:

> I also would have been unable to oppose eternal beauty to human chaos. The ocean, to him the fullest incarnation of harmony, was, I admit, horrifying for me. I even reproached Jeffers for his descriptive passages, too much those of the amateur painter who sets up his easel on a wild promontory. For me, the ocean was primarily an abyss where the nightmares located in the depths of hell by the medieval imagination came ceaselessly true, with endless variations. My kinship with the billions of monsters devouring each other was threatening because it reminded me who I was and their unconsciousness did not absolve me from sin (1983: 90).

Indeed, the other name for Nature in Miłosz's writings is the Abyss, conceived not only as a bottomless space; religious connotations, glimmering in the quoted text, are indispensable for its deeper understanding.

This abysmal quality of Nature has yet another dimension: expansion of the naturalistic outlook into areas which, so far, have been reserved for religion. The contemporary vanguard of the naturalistic view are biology lessons, with the theory of evolution as a mandatory interpretation of the natural and human world. Miłosz regards the theory, and especially Darwin himself,[5] with undisguised abomination, perceiving the proposition as an efficient tool in un-deifying the world. Reasons for his repulsion are meaningful.

[5] His ambiguous assessment of Darwin (early fascination and then fixation) deserves a separate study.

At one point, Miłosz's meditations on the essence of Nature take on a distinctly religious tone. Adopting Simone Weil's remarks on matter, Miłosz reads the natural order as the domain of necessity, force of gravitation and ruthless determinism. Nature is an arena of permanent fight, ceaseless murder, a seething universe of cruelty.[6] Big fish eat small fish, something always becomes food for something else. When human values are left aside, Nature seems to remain outside good and evil. But when we invoke our categories, the natural world – impersonal, indifferent, murderous, subject to blind causality – shows its demonic aspect, "indifferent determinism assumes diabolical features" (Miłosz 1983: 175). This demonic aspect of Nature manifests itself also in us: "[Nature] reaches our most intimate places" (Miłosz 1983: 29). Human beings, having a twofold nature, belong partly to the domain of necessity, and this always drags them down, into the abyss.

The western man, therefore, experiences an unremitting conflict on a nearly cosmic scale, a religiously conceived struggle between Darkness and Light:

> What, then, is the light? The divine in man turning against the natural in him – in other words, intelligence dissenting from "meaninglessness," searching for meaning, grafted onto darkness like a noble shoot onto a wild tree, growing greater and stronger only in and through man (Miłosz 1983: 175).

Now it becomes clear that Miłosz's remarks on Nature belong ultimately to the religious discourse, the broadest framework within which he views the natural world. In this peculiar theology, partly Christian and partly Gnostic, Nature is no longer an axiologically neutral concept, but rather a negative value. Anti-human and anti-sensical, it not only signifies disintegration and death, but also expresses the demonic order.

To sum up, the anthropology presented in *Visions* falls into the broad category of religious philosophy. Regarded *sub specie naturae*, man is a paradoxical being, partly belonging to Nature but essentially exceeding the natural order, and the two inner spheres remain in conflict. This is a schismatic anthropology, anthropology of a permanent divide, of two immutable fissures. The fissure between man and the natural world cannot be

[6] "The sundew flower closes over the insect it has seized, an adder glides among the flowers, a hawk tears another hawk to pieces – the necessary, the irreversible – and who would ever have dreamed of communicating with nature other than through conquest, competition, the strong the winners, and the weak the losers?" (Miłosz 1983: 28).

mended; all fantasies about "return to nature" are ridiculous because they substitute an idyllic myth of Nature for its real image. Similarly, the fissure separating the divine and human from the human and natural aspects of man is an irremovable stigma. Therefore, it seems almost symbolic that Miłosz proposes his "split" anthropology in the immediate vicinity of the Californian fault, where the word *fault* means both a fracture in the earth's crust and a flaw, an error or culpability, which may point to some pre-established dark fatalism of Nature.

3.

Visions from San Francisco Bay anticipates themes which recur in Miłosz's later essays and poems, specifically dark Nature and human problems with it. But can the book still attract the reader's attention after all those years?[7] Has time worked to its advantage or disadvantage? Most importantly, is Miłosz's vision of Nature interesting for historical reasons only or can it be a valid intellectual proposition even now?

How should we read *Visions* today? Generally, three methods of analysis have been employed so far: the first draws on Miłosz's biography and stresses the role of experience in his evolving views on Nature; the second relies on the bibliographic principle and demonstrates the "naturalistic" motifs recurrent in his later works; the third, ideological, reveals links between Miłosz's vision and various historical systems of thought, the Gnostic system in particular. The explanatory value of these methods seems to have been somewhat exhausted. It is time to look for other interpretations that would help us see the text anew. When rereading *Visions*, however, we must overcome a certain difficulty. Miłosz's book is not a scholarly study; as a volume of essays it defies traditional academic examination. But treating *Visions* as a collection of subjective confessions or irresponsible fantasies would be dishonest – it would do Miłosz more harm than good.

[7] If Józef Sadzik's testimony is to be credited, the publication of *Visions* in the late 1960s drew a meagre critical response. Sadzik expresses his disappointment and suggests, euphemistically, that readers are not ready for that level or scale of argumentation: "I have been waiting for a profound debate, a response from a wide circle of subtle and diverse minds (…) but it seems that Miłosz stays in regions which many of us have not sensed yet or, even less, experienced" (2004: 1).

I would like to suggest another method of reading *Visions*: viewing its philosophical and religious concept of Nature within contemporary paradigms of thought. Contrasting backgrounds tend to highlight characteristic features of analysed samples. Moreover, such a juxtaposition may bring out tacit assumptions which support Miłosz's entire intellectual construct but are less visible in an "internal" reading. I will restrict my study to three themes linked closely to Miłosz's opinions on Nature: Nature and beauty, the relationship between the human and the animal, and the theory of evolution.

Nature and beauty

Visions contains descriptions of the natural world: eucalyptus trees on slopes, "hills tending to rose and violet for a few months a year" (Miłosz 1983: 7), sea lions frolicking on a basaltic rock… But the descriptions seem to be drawn casually, half-heartedly. The author reproaches himself at once, conscious of their aesthetic function: "picture postcards in prose are not my specialty" (Miłosz 1983: 8). He tries to see Nature outside the conventions which govern its perception, ignoring the symbolic and metaphoric figures used customarily by the western mind to describe and understand the natural world. Aware of the cultural straitjacket restricting human responses, Miłosz wants to face Nature without the paraphernalia of clichés, conventional associations and metaphors which merely obscure the truth. He strives heroically at getting closer to Nature in order to catch it "naked," unarrayed in stereotypes. Of course, his attempts are doomed to failure, which he knows very well, but at least they clear the ground of the sentimental, consoling or aesthetic notions. His strategy of disillusionment is intended to reveal true Nature as if *an Sich* – Nature indifferent, hostile, filled with suffering and dread. Hence the rift.

Readers of Miłosz's poetry may regard the grim image of Nature presented so emphatically in *Visions* as somewhat peculiar. Excuse me, they are tempted to say, but what about the epiphanous "instant of low white clouds before the rising of the moon" (Miłosz 1999: 353)? What about "a hibiscus, alamanda, a red lily" (Miłosz 1999: 379), so delightful in their shape and colour? What about the seducing "red maples, brown oaks, birches/ with a light yellow leaf here and there" ("Sezon" [Season]; trans. A.S.)? About the "flying high the heavy wood grouse" (Miłosz 1999: 65)?

Aren't these an ecstatic praise of the created world, a laudation for its sensuous side? Indeed, excerpts from Miłosz's poems might be combined into a powerful hymn glorifying multiform Nature, whose animate and inanimate manifestations are so often perceived as mysterious hieroglyphs, a code of the unseen.

How can one reconcile Miłosz's vision of callous demonic Nature with his vision of Nature captivating with its beauty? How should one interpret that ambivalence? Is Miłosz's praise of Nature performed *contre coeur*? This was Werner Herzog's attitude. The director expressed his unequivocal aversion to Nature, his disgust at it. In one of his interviews, he spoke with truly Gnostic rage:

> And nature here is vile and base. I wouldn't see anything erotical here. I would see fornication and asphyxiation and choking and fighting for survival and growing and just rotting away. Of course there is a lot of misery, but it is the same misery that is all around us. The trees here are in misery and the birds are in misery. I don't think they sing, they screech in pain. (…) Taking a close look at what's around us, there is some sort of harmony. There is the harmony of overwhelming and collective murder. (…) There is no harmony in the universe. We have to get acquainted to this idea that there is no real harmony as we have conceived it. But when I say this, I say this all full of admiration for the jungle. It is not that I hate it. I love it, I love it very much. But I love it against my better judgment (Cronin 2002: 163–164).

In their approach to Nature, both Miłosz and Herzog take up Schopenhauer's refrain *natura devorans*, *natura devorata*; they both side with anti-Nature and are similar even in their grim vision of oceanic life.[8] Herzog expresses his stance with the paradoxical formula of love in hatred, or vice versa. He declares his loathing for the natural world, though his productions (several of his feature films, and his documentaries even more so) counterpoint this unequivocal opinion with visions which can be best described as sublime. In the most impressive scenes of his narration, Nature appears as an impenetrable all-powerful element, with its majesty underscored by liturgical music (cf. the finale of *Encounters at the End of the World*).

[8] In his famous "The Minnesota Declaration," Herzog wrote: "Life in the oceans must be sheer hell. A vast, merciless hell of permanent and immediate danger. So much of a hell that during evolution some species – including man – crawled, fled onto some small continents of solid land, where the Lessons of Darkness continue" (Cronin 2002: 302).

With Miłosz, it is somewhat different. Enamoured of Nature in his youth (and this love had an overtly erotic overtone[9]), he soon recovered from his passion: "I loved you, Nature, until I understood who you are" ("Do Natury" [To Nature]; trans. A.S.). And who/what is Nature? In the brutally veristic portrait presented in *Vision*, love is replaced by the awareness of a monstrous and pointless chain of births and deaths, of incomprehensible inherent cruelty. The image of the natural world which we know from the poems, the tender phenomenology of colours and forms written out in verses, focuses on Nature's outer shape, where it most often emanates its mysterious beauty. This is a mere camouflage. For Miłosz, Nature's beauty disguises its intrinsic evil. Such a clear separation of beauty and truth indicates either that the wonderful shape conceals infinite layers of mindless cruelty[10] or that Nature's beauty is distilled into intricate patterns in poetry while "the whole truth" about it remains in the real world, the truth that does not set us free. Consequently, beauty inheres not in Nature but in the language recording its shape ("Everything was the rhythm/ Of shifting trees, of a bird in flight;" Miłosz 1999: 309). Let us stop at this ambiguity.

Animals

As expressed in *Visions*, Miłosz's views on animals, especially on their relations with human beings, have two thought-provoking features. Firstly, the reader may get the impression that the human and the animal worlds have virtually no contact with each other, as if they existed in absolute separation, though side by side. A sundew waylays an insect, sea lions idle on a basaltic rock, a hawk crosses the sky; the bear and the raccoon appear anecdotally, and the jay simply is, not knowing anything about its incomprehensible jayness. Animals murder and hurt one another searching for food, while people watch them through binoculars from afar – watch them with surprise, indignation, less frequently with delight.

[9] *Visions* includes a chapter on the femininity of Nature, "Woman as a Representative of Nature" (Miłosz 1983: 26–29).

[10] This may explain Miłosz's hysterical response to educational TV programmes about nature. Miłosz considers them as obscene since their makers show, often in a beautiful form, photogenically and impassively, a spectacle of the stronger hunting for and devouring the weaker: "The story that they convey through their images is a moving illustration of the theory of evolution, of natural selection, and so on" (Miłosz 1994: 49).

Secondly, the text focuses on certain categories of animals: mammals living in the wild, birds, insects. The idea of a faint similarity between human beings and crabs or butterflies recurs several times; there is also a mention of a beetle floating in a swimming pool (Miłosz 1983: 78–79), akin to Gombrowicz's beetles on the Argentine beach, and of a wasp cut in two with a knife, possibly exempt from suffering:

> In the presence of nature, I am not "I;" I bear the stamp of my civilization, and as it does, I have a sense of dread and repugnance for the impersonal cruelty built into the structure of the universe. However, I do suspect that in humanizing pain – i.e., applying man's pain to everything alive – an error is committed: different from the earlier belief that animals were just living machines, but not a much better error nevertheless. Perhaps those creatures without consciousness bear no suffering in our sense of the word, and besides, there is very little chance that we will ever succeed in reproducing the sensations of nervous systems less developed than ours: a wasp cut in two with a knife, or, rather, the part of it separated from the thorax, will continue to sip honey; a beetle who has just lost a leg will continue scurrying down a path with undiminished energy (Miłosz 1983: 24).

This conjecture, however, is left without elaboration. We are completely distinct from crabs, butterflies, unsuffering wasps and beetles, and the similarity between us is limited to the organic sphere.

The image of animals presented in *Visions* is not accidental. Its two features have a great significance and persuasive force. On the one hand, they demonstrate the inherent cruelty of the animal world, and on the other, confirm the belief that humans and animals are absolutely separate.

Crabs, butterflies, wasps. Why not cats, dogs or horses?[11] Or pigs? Would their presence sully the lucid message of the text? What about animal farms? Zoos? About the Kentucky Fried Chicken? This is America, after all. Why is there no mention of millions of animals slaughtered every year to feed masses of people? The answer is simple. If those topics were introduced, the circle of animal cruelty would have to include humans, which would weaken the logic of the entire construct.

We may not be able to comprehend the being of a wasp, just as we are still unable to answer Nagel's classic question: "What is it like to be a bat?" (cf. Nagel 1974). But what about a cow, a dog or a horse? To say nothing

[11] Miłosz once mentions a cow (1983: 113), but only as an example of ruminating mindlessness.

about chimpanzees, genetically so close to us, in order not to take Darwin's name in vain. What we know about emotional behaviours of those animals may be a human projection to some degree[12] – but, it seems, not a dramatically erroneous projection. Observations made over the years do not lie. Anthropomorphism applied to certain animal species is not a mindless theorising but shows an important characteristic of the human mind.[13] So-called "animal Nature" comprises a broad spectrum of traits, a whole world of diverse creatures occupying various positions along the scale of similarity to humans (particularly in regard to awareness, also awareness of one's own suffering).[14]

Miłosz, however, sees an impassable chasm between the species. His stance may be explained quite simply. Despite everything, Miłosz wants to save the special position of humans among earthly creatures; he declares openly, although not without irony, that "he is on the side of man, for lack of anything better" (1983: 172). Human beings owe their special position to their intellect – this is undisputable. More controversially, Miłosz treats this human element inside the organic machinery as sacredly perfect, for unclear reasons. And when he writes: "the responsibility for our misfortunes is not borne by intellect but by intellect unenlightened" (Miłosz 1983: 177), his argument sounds like a sophistic evasion. Enlightened or unenlightened, intellect is intellect. As a matter of fact, this concept of human uniqueness, intended to counterbalance the tendencies to simplify nature and naturalize man, is based on misunderstanding. The fact that man is also an animal does not signify that man is nothing more. The fact that human beings result from many evolutionary changes and are descended from an ancestor common to all primates does not signify that they merely replicate the common source. The fact that intellect has its biological his-

[12] On problems with anthropomorphism, its kinds, advantages and disadvantages, see Daston 2005: 37–58.

[13] "When humans imagine animals, we necessarily reimagine ourselves, so these episodes reveal a great deal about notions of the human – the 'anthropos' of anthropomorphism" (Daston, Mitman 2005: 6); cf. also Serpell 1996.

[14] I will quote one instructive example: "Nearly ten years ago, my friend Claudius, together with a team of zoologists and psychologists, carried out experiments on rhesus monkeys at Stony Brook University. The experiments were very painful to the monkeys, as electrodes were inserted into their small brains. One night Claudius checked on his animals, which were placed in cages standing in a row along a long corridor. The monkeys squatting in their cages held out their tightly clenched hands to one another through the bars. At the university psychopathologic unit, the line of the monkeys' hands stretched ceaselessly from one end of the corridor to the other. From evening to daybreak" (Kott 2002: 15; trans. A.S.).

tory does not signify that it can only be analysed in biological terms. And so on. Actually, the opposite is true: by revealing the animal origins of the human species, evolutionism has emphasised our essential distinctness (the question remains how to describe this distinctness more clearly) without, however, denying its biological genesis. Besides, why should our sense of community with the rest of the animate world be a disgrace? If Darwin bears any responsibility here, it is not for the imaginary dethronement of humans but for liberating them from priding themselves in their species, the pride derived from their imperial exegesis of the Biblical phrase "fill the earth and subdue it." This is the triumph of human intellect. After all, the theory of evolution has been formulated by the man Darwin, not by an ape, even if an unusually intelligent one.

It is quite symptomatic that in this theological construction there is no trace of empathy with animals. Intentionally or not, Miłosz assumes the traditionally Christian point of view – with all its consequences. Man, equipped with intellect, is an exceptional being, the crown of creation; animals, having no awareness, cannot suffer; man has no moral obligations towards them, and their killing is morally neutral. Miłosz appears not to notice, or to be unwilling to notice, anything peculiar in these conclusions. He describes, often with emphasis, the horror of murderous Nature, seemingly without realising that certain human practices which involve animals maintain and intensify this demoniac quality of the natural world. One of such practices is the killing of animals as an amusement, which cannot be considered as patterned on animal cruelty. The Anglican theologian Andrew Linzey, exposing a belief quite common among hunting enthusiasts, comments soberly that hunters do not "imitate" natural cruelties but create them (cf. Linzey 1995: 124).[15]

As regards the essential difference between humans and animals, Miłosz seems to be constant in his opinions. In his late poem "Żółw" (Turtle; a subtle allusion to the Galapagos Islands and Darwin's tortoises, perhaps), he writes once again about the animal's being as inaccessible to man: "community of the living but community incomplete" (Miłosz 2011: 1321; trans. A.S.). The hard shell protects the turtle against predators, but it may also stand here metaphorically for cognitive inaccessibility. There is no simple transition from the human to the animal. The poet Tadeusz Różewicz would not entirely agree with that view. In his poem "Świniobicie" (Pig

[15] See also Czaja 2009: 110–125.

Slaughter), he depicts the pig as a witness to our common fate: "poor pigs/ how these innocent creatures/ suffer, sensing their imminent death" (1991: 93; trans. A.S.). From Różewicz's perspective, pigs have emotions, they feel and suffer. Thus the chasm between animals and humans need not be unsurpassable; however unpleasant it sounds, the pig may, in some sense and to some extent, become part of the human world.

In *A Year of the Hunter*, Miłosz notes on September 13, 1987:

> After a day at the annual pig roast that Allan organizes in his family's summer house near Big Sur. Between steep hills that are almost totally parched by the sun to a golden bronze, there is a gully formed by a stream; luxuriant grass, trees (mainly alders and sequoias), shade, bindweed, masses of lady's-smock near the water, almost the same magical greenery that suddenly appeared amid the dryness in the ravine near the ancient cloister in Nonza, on Corsica. A whole pig, stretched out on the coals, roasted from six in the morning to four in the afternoon (1994: 41).

A still life with a dead pig. A concise report devoid of emotions.

It's a beautiful day. The stream flows in the quiet, leaves shine with gold, the pig rotates on the spit. Such is the order of the world. Nature's perfect indifference, the indifference shared by the one who watches and describes. A moment's reflection reveals that, in this case, it was not a historical necessity nor a blind instinct but culinary tastes and gourmandism that had brought the pig to the Californian fire. Intellect, will: the human in man – very human. Is insensibility, then, really restricted to Nature? Are "the lament of a slaughtered hare," "a beetle half-eaten by a bird, a wounded lizard" (Miłosz 2003: 285) the only forms of cruelty in the universe? And if animals are blameless because they are unaware ("We are the only ones who say: cruelty;" Miłosz 1999: 221), should the blame not be laid on those equipped with awareness? I leave these questions open.

Evolution

The image of the world conveyed and consolidated in society by biology plays a crucial role in the entire mental construct of *Visions*. One chapter is entitled "On the Effects of the Natural Sciences." Evolution is by no means a neutral term in Miłosz's vocabulary; rather, it is used with a grimace, as a rude epithet, an insult. Miłosz, already emotionally involved when discussing Nature, becomes impassioned when dealing with the theory of

evolution and its destructive impact on contemporary thinking, on religious imagination in particular. "The desire for the miraculous is exposed to severe trials by the so-called natural order of things," he writes in "The Lesson of Biology," a chapter of *The Witness of Poetry*, published fourteen years after *Visions* (Miłosz 1983: 50–51). He considers it as a matter of the utmost importance because, he maintains, contemporary imagination is still ruled imperceptibly by Darwin (together with Marx and Freud). This idea recurs in Miłosz's work several times (cf. Miłosz 2010a: 36–37).

His opposition to the premises and cultural consequences of evolutionism is uncompromising. The theory of evolution is a true *bête noir* in his pessimistic depiction of the Western world. Like his other views concerning Nature, Miłosz's opinion on the theory has not changed fundamentally since *Visions*; rather, his aversion to it seems to have deepened, especially as regards its destructive influence on the religious outlook. In one of his late essays, Miłosz writes: "I don't quite understand how the Vatican was able to acknowledge the theory of evolution when the biological sciences are the crowning achievement of the Enlightenment and create the most horrible difficulties, erasing the dividing line between man and other living beings" (2010a: 41; trans. A.S.). The Enlightenment, of course, is yet another incriminated entry in Miłosz's list.

What piques Miłosz in the evolution is not its existence itself (though we may get the impression that he would gladly erase the discovery of the evolutionary mechanisms from the history of science), but the fact that the Darwinian view of the development of species includes man, which has negative implications for anthropology. The acceptance of the evolutionary model of life results in the acceptance of the image of the world that moves inanely "from nowhere to nowhere" and of human life as an aimless play of coincidences. Miłosz finds the doctrines repulsive because, more or less obliquely, they promote the revolting vision of the human (and nonhuman) world as a monstrous spectacle of everybody fighting everybody else for survival. In this context, the expression "rat race" loses its metaphorical sense and becomes a description of reality. What is more important from Miłosz's perspective, the promotion of the evolutionary concept leads directly to barren imagination, since it depicts the world as deprived of its charm, meaning and metaphysical basis – a world devoid of the divine breath of life.

Of course, there is nothing reprehensible in this kind of opinion, and one can hardly argue over someone else's assessments. The problem is

that *Visions* and Miłosz's later essays present a view of the process and theory of evolution, especially of their dire consequences for anthropology, which, though impressive, is simplified, biased and at times misleading.[16] What does Miłosz really criticise? We may suspect that the poet does not distinguish between the evolution as a natural fact, confirmed by ample evidence, and more or less radical evolutionist theories, even though there is a considerable difference between evolutionary biology and, say, social Darwinism or social biology. He sometimes moderates his position, stating that his criticism concerns mainly the debased version of evolutionism for the masses, but he clearly rejects all this biologistic narration *en bloc*. Interestingly, distrustful as Miłosz is of the "scientific view of the world," particularly of biological achievements, he speaks warmly of new physics as a science which enriches imagination and opens one to transcendence.[17]

Let us focus on one issue, probably the most important to Miłosz: that of biology versus religion. Miłosz often suggests that the anthropologies entailed by these two spheres cannot be reconciled. *On the Origin of Species* excludes the Book of Genesis: "We reacted with anger and offended dignity when it was learned that man, too, belongs to the chain of universal transformation – that 'he is descended from the monkeys.' A justified reaction to painful knowledge" (Miłosz 1983: 22–23).

Indeed, the evolutionist doctrine (not science!)[18] has influenced the popular consciousness for a long time, supposedly undermining, if not invalidating, the religious outlook. But can we state today, a hundred and fifty years after Darwin's theses, that biological sciences are in permanent conflict with religion? Can we say with confidence that the world of nature is governed tyrannically by mechanisms of natural selection bereft of

[16] For a thorough survey of evolutionists' and creationists' arguments, see Pietrzak 2010: 203–230; for a discussion of problems with accepting the theory of evolution, especially in the Christian context, see Życiński 2011: 37–49; for a presentation of the role of negative stereotypes in perceiving the theory of evolution, see Gould 2001.

[17] "After all, we still live in Darwin's world. And I would say that there is a discrepancy between biological sciences and physics. The world of quantum physics differs from that of Darwin" (Miłosz 2010b: 155; trans. A.S.).

[18] Miłosz seems not to distinguish between a science, which examines facts and relations between them, and a scientific doctrine, which goes beyond those findings. W.J.H. Kunicki-Goldfinger, a brilliant microbiologist, writes: "Biology is not interested in the meaning of the world nor in the purposes of human life; it is not even interested in the meaning of life as a natural phenomenon. It only examines the mechanisms of life and its development" (1993: 71; trans. A.S.).

miraculousness and that biology does not open the mind to the spiritual dimension of experience?

Below, I give two examples of a fascinating meeting of the biological with the spiritual, one taken from literature, the other from science.

Though I cannot comment on the crab, as one of Miłosz's creatures, I can discuss the butterfly. Vladimir Nabokov famously caught butterflies. He was a professional entomologist – he discovered several species, one was even named after him. Years of practice gave him a profound knowledge of the *Lepidoptera*.[19] The following remarks from *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* might bewilder staunch adherents of biological determinism:

> When a certain moth resembles a certain wasp in shape and color, it also walks and moves its antennae in a waspish, unmothlike manner. When a butterfly has to look like a leaf, not only are all the details of a leaf beautifully rendered but markings mimicking grub-bored holes are generously thrown in. "Natural selection," in the Darwinian sense, could not explain the miraculous coincidence of imitative aspect and imitative behavior, nor could one appeal to the theory of "the struggle for life" when a protective device was carried to a point of mimetic subtlety, exuberance, and luxury far in excess of a predator's power of appreciation. I discovered in nature the nonutilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception (Nabokov 1989: 125).

Nabokov's observations by no means deny the spectacle of cruelty in the natural world. They show, however, that fundamental laws of nature may sometimes fail, that the natural world includes enclaves of miraculousness reaching far beyond useful pragmatics, and that biology, too, can produce entities strongly reminiscent of works of art. His words restore confidence in the possibility of returning to Nature's *mysterium fascinans* – not to its aesthetic dimension but precisely the biological one. This possibility, Miłosz claims in *Visions*, has been lost for ever (1983: 21–22).

The second example concerns the precarious junction of science and faith, of biology and theology. The most difficult issue to Christian believers seems to be the randomness of evolution. But is it true that this accidental character of the evolutionary process can in no way be reconciled with the purposeful act of creation described in the first verses of the Book

[19] The entomologist Robert Michael Pyle says that Nabokov's interest in butterflies was often viewed as a harmless obsession, in spite of his expertise in lepidopterology (cf. Boyd, Pyle 2000: 35).

of Genesis? Does the acceptance of the evolutionary perspective inevitably shatter the Biblical, and Christian, belief that human beings have been created "in the image of God" (Gen 1: 27)? Must evolution and God be mutually exclusive? Not necessarily.

If Genesis is not treated as an excerpt from a handbook of biology, astronomy or anthropology but read according to the standards of Biblical hermeneutics, and if the Creator is not perceived in a naively anthropomorphic way, a certain solution emerges. The hypothesis of theistic evolution, called BioLogos, put forward by the eminent biologist Francis S. Collins,[20] proves that the evolutionist view need not lead to dogmatic atheism (as it does in the apparently irremediable case of Richard Dawkins). While commenting on God's possible participation in "such an apparently random, potentially heartless, and inefficient" (Collins 2007: 204) sequence of events as the process of evolution, Collins writes:

> But how could God take such chances? If evolution is random, how could He really be in charge, and how could He be certain of an outcome that included intelligent beings at all?
> The solution is actually readily at hand, once one ceases to apply human limitations to God. If God is outside of nature, then He is outside of space and time. In that context, God could in the moment of creation of the universe also know every detail of the future. That could include the formation of the stars, planets, and galaxies, all of the chemistry, physics, geology, and biology that led to the formation of life on earth, and the evolution of humans, right to the moment of your reading this book – and beyond. In that context, evolution could appear to us to be driven by chance, but from God's perspective the outcome would be entirely specified. Thus, God could be completely and intimately involved in the creation of all species, while from our perspective, limited as it is by the tyranny of linear time, this would appear a random and undirected process (Collins 2007: 205).

I quote this passage not for apologetic reasons but to show that the evolutionist view may not be at odds with some form of spirituality. Thus

[20] Collins is one of the most brilliant contemporary geneticists, former head of the Human Genome Project, evolutionary biologist and believing Christian. He proposes a way of thinking in which faith and knowledge remain separate, and biology is an ally of theology, not its enemy. He derives his hypothesis from a remarkable imaginative power, which may be a strong counterargument to Miłosz's mantra about evolutionism destroying the sources of imagination. In contrast with the concept of Intelligent Design, BioLogos is not a scientific theory but a theistic outlook, though open to debate with science. Consequently, it does not use God to patch up current knowledge, as the Intelligent Design does.

understood, evolutionism, which acknowledges facts and is open to religious intuitions, questions the validity of Miłosz's suggestion that once the perspective of faith is accepted, the conflict between the religious and the scientific visions of the world must be deepened.[21] Rather, I would agree with the geneticist Jerry A. Coyne:

> Accepting evolution needn't turn you into a despairing nihilist, or rob your life of purpose and meaning. (…) Nor must it promote atheism, for enlightened religion has always found a way to accommodate the advances of science. In fact, understanding evolution should surely deepen and enrich our appreciation of the living world and our place in it (2010: xix).

There are many evolutionisms today, no longer based on the mechanismic order popular in Darwin's times; science, aware of its own limits, has abandoned positivist dogmatism. Miłosz's diatribes against the theory of evolution seem to belong mentally to the 19th century.

Briefly speaking, the butterfly need not be a mere tool of blind evolution, and the evolutionary vision of the origin of species need not exclude the transcendent dimension. Perhaps the whole complicated relation between biology and theology should be thought over anew. For the start, we should perhaps return to Bergson and search for the real meaning of the term *l'evolution creatrice*.[22] Is a metaphysical interpretation of evolution possible? I leave this question unanswered.

[21] "Whoever treats religion seriously, should strive to intensify its conflict with the image of the world imposed by the victorious science and technology, instead of patching up the flaws and maintaining – for external, or even internal, use – that they are not dangerous" (Miłosz 2010a: 30; trans. A.S.).

[22] Historians of philosophy write: "Bergson describes the history of evolution conceived of as the work of the vital thrust in things. This history is that of a continuous effort of invention which, unique at its origin, scatters itself through the vegetable kingdom and the animal kingdom, where it branches off, on the one hand in the direction that leads to insects, especially to hymenopters, while, on the other hands, it follows the line of the vertebrates and culminates in man. The solution represented by the hymenopters is that of instinct. The solution represented by the vertebrates is that of intelligence, but, in both cases, the solution has been found by the same initial thrust, or impulse, which is the fundamental energy at work in the history of the world" (Gilson, Lagan, Maurer 1966: 313).

4

"I am here. Those three words contain all that can be said – you begin those words and you return to them. Here means on this earth, on this continent and no other, in this city and no other, and in this epoch I call mine, this century, this year" (Miłosz 1983: 3).

This is the beginning of *Visions from San Francisco Bay*. Viewed over forty years after the book was written. I am here. Not Miłosz and not in California. But the problems Miłosz once posed to his readers still prove to be riveting. My solutions may be peculiar to me, but I, too, face the fundamental questions concerning the status of nature and the resulting shape of anthropology. Admittedly, there are no cognitively compelling unequivocal answers in sight, and those given with absolute certainty today may turn out to be outdated tomorrow. Nevertheless, the Californian biology lesson continues.

The texts we read are never cognitively neutral but always anchored in biographies, outlooks, philosophies. We decide whether we treat Miłosz's visions as outmoded misperceptions or as penetrating insights that are still relevant. We may be reading Miłosz's book, but the book is also reading us.

Acknowledgements: This article appeared in a slightly different form in *Polska Sztuka Ludowa – Konteksty* 4 (295), 2011 (see below for the bibliographical details).

trans. Anna Skucińska

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