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TRANSLATION'S DECEIT: CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ AND NEGRO SPIRITUALS

Abstract: This article discusses the politics of translation of eleven negro spirituals, which Czesław Miłosz produced in 1948, while working as a cultural attaché of the Polish embassy in Washington D.C. Initially, Miłosz intended to publish all of these translations in the Polish literary weekly *Nowiny Literackie*. Although only a few of these translations appeared in the weekly, the article proposes that Miłosz's project played a role in opposing the Soviet cultural and political domination of Poland after World War II. Drawing parallels between research on slavery and the analysis of power structures in post-war Poland presented in *The Captive Mind*, the article argues that Miłosz's translations were driven by the "ethics of deception" akin to resistance strategies inscribed in the original contexts of production of negro spirituals. The article relies on theories of translation developed by deconstruction to question the traditional hierarchies between "translation" and "the original," and, consequently, to complicate Miłosz's position as "a translator" of spirituals. Since spirituals are improvisational by origin, specific examples of Miłosz's translation choices demonstrate that his role in the translation process was participatory and creative rather than imitative. Thus the article concludes that the translation of spirituals enabled Miłosz both to be and not to be the author of these texts, a subversive move in the Soviet-dominated system, where direct expressions of longing for freedom (only implicitly voiced in the spirituals) may not have been welcome. This interpretation is consistent with Miłosz's other early works, which draw parallels between Polish post-war and slavery/colonial experiences, and adds to current debates on the possible convergences between post-Soviet and postcolonial conditions.

Keywords: Czesław Miłosz, negro spirituals, translation, ethics of deception, social realism, postcolonial

Czesław Miłosz's diplomatic service in Washington D.C. (1946–1950) was most fruitful for his translation. During this period Miłosz completed

Polish renditions of works by almost thirty poets, mainly from English, Spanish and Chinese, and he published most of these translations in Polish literary journals. Subsequently he included them in *Kontynenty*, a 1958 collection of essays and translations. Miłosz's post-World War II correspondence, gathered in the volume *Zaraz po wojnie*, offers interesting insights into the poet's motivation for being a translator during that time. The letters document Miłosz's exchanges with the editors of the leading Polish literary magazines: Kazimierz Wyka (*Twórczość*), Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz (*Nowiny Literackie*), Karol Kuryluk (*Odrodzenie*) and Ryszard Matuszewski (*Kuźnica*), all of whom repeatedly begged him for new poems. However, Miłosz kept sending them translations instead, excusing himself with his temporary "reluctance to publish." In the letter to Iwaszkiewicz, dated October 1947, he explained: "I have a lot of my own poems, but I suffer from a strange disease, a reluctance to publish that results not so much from pride but from scruples and fears of the pitfalls of popularity, which is an extremely dangerous thing" (Miłosz 2007: 184; trans. K.J.).

"The pitfalls of popularity" can be read as a code phrase that signalled the poet's unwillingness to pander to the socialist state and the aesthetics of social realism it promoted (cf. Miłosz 2007: 150). Miłosz could not write about these issues openly in his letters because of the censorship to which his correspondence was routinely submitted. However, the poet's later comments, also included in *Zaraz po wojnie*, show clearly that, in the context of ideological limitations imposed on his own poetry, Miłosz assigned certain strategic roles to his translations. In the introduction to his correspondence with Irena and Tadeusz Krońscy, Miłosz explains that "in 1950 [he] planned to hide from social realism in the translation of Shakespeare" (Miłosz 2007: 270; trans. K.J.). Similarly, Miłosz describes his translations of Pablo Neruda as an anti-dote to contemporary Polish poetry, which in his view became "bland" after being "tailored to the Soviet taste" (Miłosz 2007: 412, trans. K.J.). Also, in his conversation with Renata Gorczyńska, included in *Podróżny świata*, Miłosz admits that, as a translator, he was guided by "a sense of duty." "I had to do something to fight this drabness in Poland. Because I am a poet, I was able to introduce a shot of colour" (Miłosz, Gorczyńska 1992: 74; trans. K.J.).

The above statements indicate that translations in which Miłosz chose to "hide" between 1946–1950 were important to him for at least two reasons. First, they allowed him to continue working creatively and publishing without major ideological compromise. Second, the translations were

an act of resistance against the officially promoted aesthetics, which, in his letters, Miłosz described through yet additional code expressions: “drabness” and “boredom.” However, one wonders whether in addition to diversifying Polish aesthetics, Miłosz’s translations also served him as vehicles for certain political messages that would not be tolerated outside of the translation’s “safety zone.”

An interesting answer to this question emerges from an analysis of Miłosz’s translations of negro spirituals. In an intricate way their Polish contexts play with the spirituals’ original political contexts. Overall, Miłosz published Polish translations of eleven spirituals. The first four, along with an extensive translator’s introduction, came out in 1948 in *Nowiny Literackie*; these included the translations of “Go Down Moses,” “Where Shall I Be When the First Trumpet Sounds,”¹ “I Know Moon-rise” and “I Wish I Have Had an Eagle Wing.” Later, in *Kontynenty*, Miłosz reprinted the latter three and added translations of six “new” spirituals: “God’s Goin’ to Set This World on Fire,” “Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho,” “Going to Pull My War-clothes,” “‘Tis Me, O Lord,” “Couldn’t Hear Nobody Pray” and “Sometimes I Feel.”² Finally, in 1953 Miłosz included the translation of “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” in the first edition of his poetry collection *Światło dzienne* [Daylight]. However, Miłosz’s correspondence with Iwaszkiewicz indicates that, originally, he planned to publish all his translations together in *Nowiny Literackie* (Miłosz 2007: 200). Unfortunately, during Iwaszkiewicz’s absence, other members of the editorial board had divided Miłosz’s submission into two parts, and even though Iwaszkiewicz implied that the remaining translations would soon be published, they never appeared in the journal (Miłosz 2007: 206–207). In Miłosz’s own words, he was so “furious” about this oversight that he later complained to Ryszard Matuszewski, accusing *Nowiny Literackie* of “killing” his translations (Miłosz 2007: 445).

Miłosz’s “fury” resulted probably from more than just a sense of wasted effort; the editors’ cuts weakened the political message of the sequence, which could be read as an indirect commentary on the Polish reality of the

¹ Miłosz’s translation of this spiritual diverges considerably from its standard original version. This divergence can be explained by Miłosz’s specific approach to translating spirituals, which I discuss later.

² Again, the translated version of this spiritual poses many problems for anyone seeking one-to-one semantic correspondence between the original and its translation. I discuss this translation in detail later.

time. Miłosz's introduction in *Nowiny Literackie* shows that he was well versed in the origins of negro spirituals: the fusion of the Christian tradition with music and rituals smuggled by black slaves out of Africa. Miłosz calls spirituals a testimony to Christianity's power of "giving form to hope and despair" (1948a; trans. K.J.). Indeed, under the U.S. system of slavery, Christianity was one of the few accepted forms of expression through which African Americans could contemplate their experience. Identifying with the plight of Jews persecuted by the pharaoh and finding consolation in the images of heaven, slaves used these motifs in their songs, composed to African tunes passed down through generations. At the same time, spirituals were a form of contestation: a code used by slaves to outsmart their unaware owners. While the masters rejoiced in the slaves' religious zeal, believed to enhance their submissiveness (and their perception of heaven as a reward for good service on earth), the slaves cultivated the power of character, which enabled them to preserve their inner freedom and at times even to actively resist their bondage (Johnson 1925: 20; Lovell 1972: 220–374; DuBois 1994: 155–164; Cone 1991: 29–30; Burnim, Maultsby 2006: 587–588). Singing about freedom in heaven, slaves were in fact thinking about freedom on earth, and they associated the road to Canaan with underground railroad, which lead them to the "Promised Land" of the North (White, White 2005: 115–116). The best example of this double meaning of spirituals is "Steal Away to Jesus," to which Miłosz refers in his introduction, even though he does not translate it. The call to "steal away" included in the title was usually understood as a summoning to a secret gathering, where slaves planned their escapes (Miłosz 1948a: 4; Lovell 1972: 191, 228). According to John Lovell, a scholar of early African American music, it was this particular spiritual that helped Nat Turner to summon his fellow conspirators during their common preparations for the slave uprising.

The full selection of Miłosz's translations provides a good overview of the diversity of metaphors that gave spirituals their ambiguously contestatory character. The selection includes two spirituals that almost openly express a desire for freedom: "Go Down, Moses," whose refrain "Let my people go" sounds like a demand for the abolition of slavery, and "God's Goin' to Set This World on Fire," whose revolutionary tone and apocalyptic imagery prophesize the end of the existing *status quo* (Miłosz 1948a: 4; Miłosz 2005: 122; cf. Curtis-Burlin 2001: 14–21 and Sandburg 1927: 478–479). Slightly subtler are the two spirituals "I Wish I Have Had an Eagle Wing" and "Sometimes I Feel," which represent the popular "flight motif,"

images of flying birds that slaves would recognize as symbols of escape (Miłosz 2005: 123, 128; cf. Diton 1928: 6–7 and Johnson 1925: 41–42). These two songs are also part of a larger group of spirituals that contain a promise of heaven, usually understood as a dream of “a better world” or prejudice-free areas of the earth, like the North or Canada (DuBois 1994: 162). Such areas are lauded in most of the spirituals translated by Miłosz, including “Going to Pull My War-Clothes,” which describes a moment of a family reunion, an image extremely significant for people whom slave auctions frequently tore away from spouses, children and parents (Miłosz 2005: 124–125; cf. Diton 1928: 24).

A different sentiment is expressed in “‘Tis Me, O Lord,” where the speaker emphasizes their individuality through being distinct from other family members:

‘Tis not my Mudder but it’s me, O Lord,
Standin’ in the need of prayer –
(...)

‘Tis not my Sister but it’s me, O Lord,
Standin’ in the need of prayer –
(Lomax 1947: 50–56)

Comparing this spiritual to Emerson’s “Self-reliance,” Lovell observes that individuality was not a welcome quality in a slave and, consequently, such a strong expression of an individual identity was already an act of subversion (1972: 236). Another example of symbolism that enabled slaves to shape their willpower can be found in “Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho,” the song represents a group of spirituals based on biblical stories that featured protagonists who defeated much stronger antagonists (Lovell 1972: 229). The story of Joshua who managed to take down the walls of Jericho inspired slaves with hope that one day they would defeat the plantation owners as well. According to eye-witnesses, “Joshua” became a symbolic execution of this hope when its performance was accompanied by ritual ring shouts; the sight of slaves singing and marching in a circle truly evoked Joshua’s army on the verge of conquering Jericho (Burnim, Maultsby 2006: 590).

Miłosz’s selection thus clearly showed Polish readers that spirituals were tools of struggle for inner freedom in total disenfranchisement while, at the same time, they allowed slaves to keep up appearances of having accepted their plight. The selection also offered a glimpse of what James

H. Cone calls “an ethics of deception,” underlying a slave’s attitude towards the system as a whole:

To survive in an oppressive society, it is necessary to outsmart the oppressors and make them think that you are what you *know* you are not. It is to make them believe that you accept their definitions of black and white. (...) To be able to deceive the master was often the only means of freedom (1991: 26).³

Anyone familiar with Miłosz’s life and work will immediately notice the resemblance between slaves’ survival tactics described by Cone and the poet’s own inner struggles developed in reaction to communism and the Soviet power in Poland after World War II.⁴ In his preface to the Polish edition of *The Captive Mind*,⁵ Miłosz actually reminisces of his work in Polish diplomatic service using a metaphor that evokes a condition of slavery: “Throughout those years I felt like a man who can move around quite freely, but, behind him, he always drags a long chain, binding him to one place” (1980: 14; trans. K.J.) Further on, Miłosz admits to playing “a game” strikingly similar to the strategies of deception described by Cone: “a game of concessions and outer declarations of loyalty, tricks and intricate moves in defence of certain values” (Miłosz 1980: 14, trans. K.J.). This “game” that Miłosz played until 1951 (when he broke with the Polish government and requested political asylum in France), inspired him to write *The Captive Mind*, where he famously labelled it *Ketman*, a term borrowed from Gobineau’s *Religions et Philosophies dans l’Asie Centrale*. Excerpts from Gobineau’s work, quoted by Miłosz, indicate that *Ketman* and slaves’ “ethics of deception” share the same purpose – to reverse the hierarchy of power between the oppressor and the oppressed:

Ketman fills the man who practices it with pride. Thanks to it, a believer raises himself to a permanent state of superiority over the man he deceives, be he a minister of state or a powerful king; to him who uses *Ketman*, the other is a miserable blind man (...); while you, tattered and dying of hunger, trembling

³ Of course, not all slave owners were that easily deceived. For this reason, at some plantations slaves were forbidden to participate in religious congregations and to sing songs “of their own making” (Miłosz 1948: 4; White, White 2005: 55–71).

⁴ Despite his leftist views, from the very beginning Miłosz found it difficult to accept the political situation in Poland after World War II. Andrzej Franaszek proves this difficulty in chapter six of Miłosz’s biography by citing the poet’s statements addressed to Melchior Wańkiewicz and Renata Gorczyńska (2011: 384).

⁵ Miłosz wrote a new preface to his English translation.

externally at the feet of duped force, your eyes are filled with light, you walk in brightness before your enemies. It is an unintelligent being that you make sport of; it is a dangerous beast that you disarm (Miłosz 1990: 58; trans. J.Z.).

There is, however, one crucial difference between Ketman and slaves' tactics of deception: while the coded messages of slave songs and rituals enabled their performers to preserve their inner freedom and dignity, Ketman, in Miłosz's words, makes people "grow closely" into their roles (Miłosz 1990: 55). Yet, a closer analysis reveals this difference to be superficial; scholars of African American culture note that masks and faked submissiveness toward their masters put slaves at a risk of internalizing the oppressor's values, and subsequently made them assume "uncle Tom" attitudes or debase their own race (Cone 1991: 27). At the same time, in *The Captive Mind*, Miłosz distinguishes one variety of Ketman that he considers "exceptionally free of falsity;" it is "professional Ketman," whose manifestations include artistic creativity, of which spirituals are obviously an example (Miłosz 1990: 69–70; trans. J.Z.).⁶

One can say that through the translation of negro spirituals Miłosz performed "professional Ketman" himself. He was aware that all literary works that highlighted the discrimination of "Negroes" in the United States were welcome in communist countries, thanks to their propaganda value in the Cold War politics (cf. Dudziak 2000; Baldwin 2002; von Eschen 2004). Even though Miłosz took advantage of this situation to translate some works he admired (cf. Miłosz 1958: 349–350), he avoided engaging directly in propaganda. He was not indifferent towards American racism,⁷ but sending his translations of spirituals to Iwaszkiewicz he insisted that the editors should not publish them together with "photographs of Negroes" because this work should not be used for "any propaganda" (Miłosz 2007: 200, trans. K.J.).⁸ Keeping in mind the politically ambivalent role of negro

⁶ Miłosz's original Polish phrase for "professional Ketman" is *Ketman pracy zawodowej*, which could be literally translated into English as "the Ketman of professional work."

⁷ A column *Życie w USA* that Miłosz wrote for *Odrodzenie* under the penname Jan M. Nowak demonstrates how the poet's views on American racism evolved throughout 1947. While in the seventh issue of *Odrodzenie* Miłosz suggests that the situation of the "negro" should not be a political priority in the U.S., in the issue thirty-one he writes with great zeal about the importance of the problem.

⁸ Miłosz's request refers probably to his earlier publication in *Nowiny Literackie*, the translation of "Canción de cuna para dormir a un negrito" ("Lullaby for a Little Black Boy") by the Uruguay poet Ildefonso Pereda Valdes, which appeared next to a long article on lynchings in the U.S., illustrated with shocking photographs.

spirituals, one can thus assume that Miłosz consciously recreated the strategies of deception used by their black authors; faking submission to the dominant political and cultural trends, he used his translations to “smuggle in” subversive content, capable of inspiring the audience with a desire for freedom.

Additional evidence in support of this claim can be found in Miłosz’s long-term plans for his translations. As his letters to Iwaszkiewicz and Matuszewski indicate, after the publication in *Nowiny Literackie*, Miłosz intended to include the translations of spirituals in his “anthology of poetry of many nations” and then use them to create a “Negro cantata” with music composed by a Polish émigré in the U.S., Tadeusz Kassern (Miłosz 2007: 200, 422).⁹ Although the project never came into fruition (probably due to Kassern’s illness), Miłosz must have been very serious about it because his translations appeared in *Nowiny Literackie* with the following clause: “All rights to the musical adaptation of these songs are reserved by the translator” (trans. K.J.). When Matuszewski expressed his lack of enthusiasm for the “samples” of negro spirituals, in response Miłosz emphasized that the translations should be read as lyrics to be performed with music (Miłosz 2007: 443, 445).

Because the music of negro spirituals already exists and has been known internationally for over a hundred years, Miłosz’s insistence on reserving rights to their musical adaptation may be surprising, unless one views the relation between spirituals and Miłosz’s translations of them as a symbiosis between two equal literary works, functioning outside of the traditional categories of “the original” and its contingent “translation.” Such a view of Miłosz’s translations is made possible by the deconstructionist theory, which reverses the traditional hierarchy of the primacy of “the original” and questions the very existence of a fixed original that can be faithfully “recreated” in translation (cf. Bukowski, Heydel 2009: 33). Lawrence Venuti observes that in the light of Derrida’s theory of *différance*, both the foreign text and its translation are “derivative:”

both consist of diverse linguistic and cultural materials that neither the foreign writer nor the translator originates, and that destabilize the work of signification (...) As a result, a foreign text is the site of many different semantic possibilities that are fixed only provisionally in any one translation, on the basis of

⁹ The anthology was eventually published as *Kontynenty*, which included nine out of the eleven translations of negro spirituals.

varying cultural assumptions and interpretive choices, in specific social situations, in different historical periods (1995: 17–18; cf. Derrida 1985).

Venuti's theory proves most useful in reference to translations of texts that are improvisational, which is certainly true of negro spirituals (as well as of a considerable portion of African American poetry that has grown out of them). In *Nowiny Literackie* Miłosz himself described the improvisational character of spirituals:

These songs (...) had been preserved orally until they began to be transcribed at the end of the last century. The written medium, however, did not put a stop to their development. Performed constantly by the Negro people, spirituals take on new versions; besides, new songs are created as well. It seems that the process of their creation has remained the same; it is based on the cooperation between "the leader" – the actual poet or minstrel – and the group (the religious congregation), which picks up the motifs he provides and reworks them (1948a: 4; cf. Johnson 1925: 21; trans. K.J.).

In their broad study of slave songs, Shane White and Graham White note that the lyrics of both negro spirituals and work songs have never been fixed or bound permanently to one tune; they were simply "a frame to be filled as the moment dictated" (2005: 59). White and White cite an eye-witness from approximately 1840, who describes the songs he heard in the South in the following way: "[T]he blacks (...) leave out stanzas and introduce new ones at pleasure (...) You may, in passing from Virginia to Louisiana, hear the same tune a hundred times, but seldom the same words accompanying it" (2005: 60). The transcription and publication of spirituals in various collections "fix" the lyrics only superficially; the sources which Miłosz cites as the basis of his translations often contain several versions of the selected spirituals.¹⁰

Consequently, because the "stable" original is *de facto* absent, Miłosz ceases to be a translator and re-creator of spirituals and becomes instead a member of the congregation he described in his introduction: one who "picks up" and "reworks [the motifs]" provided by "the leader," thus participating in the ever open-ended process of the text creation. Such a dynamics blurs the distinction between "the author" and "the translator." Ve-

¹⁰ These sources are: *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* edited by James Weldon Johnson, *Negro Folk Songs* by Natalie Curtis-Burlin, *The American Songbag* by Carl Sandburg, *Folk Song: U.S.A.* by John and Alan Lomax and *Thirty Six South Carolina Spirituals* by Carl Diton (Miłosz 1948a: 4).

nuti points out that in the light of copyright laws the translator both “is and is not the author” (1998: 8–10). Similarly, in relation to his translations of spirituals, Miłosz both is and is not the author who is able to reserve the rights to the musical adaptation of the texts. As a result, this particular translation project can be viewed as Miłosz’s truly masterful “deception”: whether consciously or unconsciously, in negro spirituals Miłosz found not only an escape from social realism but also an opportunity both to be and not to be the author of texts that express an individual and collective desire for freedom.

Three of Miłosz’s translations in particular reflect the poet’s role as “the author and a non-author,” manifested in his semantic decisions conditioned by the specific historical situation. One of these spirituals, “God’s Goin’ to Set This World on Fire,” appears in Carl Sandburg’s songbook (used by Miłosz) in two versions:

Version A

God’s goin’ to set this world on fire,
 God’s goin’ to set this world on fire,
 One o’ these days!
 God’s goin’ to set this world on fire,
 One o’ these days!

I’m goin’ to walk an’ talk with Jesus,
 I’m goin’ to walk an’ talk with Jesus,
 One o’ these days!
 I’m goin’ to walk an’ talk with Jesus,
 One o’ these days!

I’m goin’ to climb up Jacob’s ladder,
 I’m goin’ to climb up Jacob’s ladder,
 One o’ these days!
 (...)

All you sinners gonna turn up missing,
 All you sinners gonna turn up missing,
 One o’ these days!
 (...)

Version B

God don't want no coward soldiers,
 God don't want no coward soldiers,
 Some o'these days.
 He wants valiant hearted soldiers
 Some o'these days.

We are climbin' Jacob's ladder,
 We are climbin' Jacob's ladder,
 Some o'these days.
 Every round goes higher and higher,
 Some o'these days.

(Sandburg 1927: 479)

Miłosz's translation of this spiritual is a compilation of the first two stanzas of version A with the two stanzas of version B (Miłosz 2005: 122). Such a combination strengthens the song's revolutionary character: following the image of fire, set to the world by God, the Polish reader receives a battle cry for "valiant hearted soldiers" ("*dzielnego serca żołnierzy*") and a reproach of "coward soldiers" ("*trwożnych żołnierzy*"). Additionally, significant is the selection of a collective subject, "We are climbin' Jacob's ladder" and the translation of "Some o'these days" as "*Niedługo już*" [Soon already] – the two choices that in the particular historical context can be interpreted as expressions of the whole nation's urge for change. Paradoxically, according to Sandburg's commentary, "God's Goin' to Set This World on Fire" was still performed in the 1920s during protests organized by Industrial Workers of the World, who carried signs "Solidarity," calling for a union between their black and white members. Although, obviously, this use of the spiritual cannot be linked directly to the Polish "Solidarity" movement in the 1980s, Sandburg's commentary again points to similarities between Polish historical experience and the experiences of African Americans, which inspired negro spirituals.

Another significant spiritual, "Going to Pull My War-clothes," appears in two sources, cited by Miłosz, yet each of the sources contains a considerably different version:

Going to pull my war-clothes,
 down by the river side,
 down by the river side,
 down by the river side.

Going to pull my war-clothes,
 down by the river side,
 Study war no more.
 Yes, I'm going to study war no more,
 Study war no more,
 Study war no more.

Going to meet my brethern
 down by the river side,
 (...)
 Study war no more.
 Yes, I'm going to study war no more,
 Study war no more,
 Study war no more.

Going to meet my sister
 down by the river side,
 (...)

(Diton 1928: 24)

I'm go'n' to lay down my sword and shield, I'm go'n' to lay down my sword
 and shield,
 Down by de ribber-side, down by de ribber-side, I'm go'n' to lay down my
 sword and shield.
 I ain' go'n' to study war no mo', I ain' go'n' to study war no mo',
 I ain' go'n' to study war no mo', I ain' go'n' to study war no mo'.

I'm go'n' to ride on a milk-white horse, I'm go'n' to ride on a milk white horse,
 Down by de ribber-side, down by de ribber-side, I'm go'n' to ride on a milk
 white horse,
 (...)

I'm go'n' to wear a starry crown, I'm go'n' to wear a starry crown,
 (Sandburg 1927: 481)

Miłosz's translation is clearly based on Diton's version; it contains the same verse structure and the stanzas referring to "my brethren" and "my sister." However, it also includes elements borrowed from Sandburg, as illustrated by the following excerpt:

Mój wojenny strój tutaj **złożę**
 My war attire here **I will lay down**

Na brzegu rzeki,
On the bank of the river,

(...)

Nie będę więcej uczyć się wojny.
I will not anymore study war

Nie, nie będę już więcej uczyć się wojny,
No, I will not anymore study war,

**Nigdy już wojny,
Never anymore war**

**Nigdy już wojny.
Never anymore war.**

(Miłosz 2005: 124; emphasis and back-trans. K.J.)

The first line features the verb *złożyć*, which is semantically closer to the English phrase “lay down,” used by Sandburg than to the verb “pull” used by Diton. As a result, Miłosz’s version of this spiritual again reads like a compilation of different “originals,” in which semantic choices derive from the historical contexts of translation. The image of laying down the war clothes connotes the idea of ending a war more strongly than the image of pulling them. Moreover, this image matches the final lines of the translation, *Nigdy już wojny* [Never again war]. Although these words can be viewed as an equivalent of a portion of the “original” final lines “war no more (...) war no mo,” appearing on their own, without the verb “study,” the lines can more easily be interpreted as a plea: “Let us never have war anymore.” Thus, the verb choice and the phrasing of the final lines supply the Polish translation of this spiritual with a tone that is more strongly anti-war than any of the “original” versions: the song becomes not just a call to “study war no more” but also an appeal to eliminate war altogether. Moreover, Miłosz’s decision to preserve Diton’s reference to “war-clothes” [*strój wojenny*] rather than Sandburg’s “sword and shield” manifests the translator’s preference for contemporary connotations. One can imagine that three years after the end of World War II, with the global conflicts that threatened to culminate in another world war, the translation choices discussed above gave Miłosz the best opportunity to express Polish experiences as well.

Finally, the translation published under the title “Czasem ja jestem” (“Sometimes I Am”) is a fascinating example of Miłosz’s “authorship” that defines his relation to his renditions of negro spirituals:

Czasem ja jestem jak orzeł na niebie
Sometimes I am like an eagle in the sky

Świat taki czysty i piękny jaśnieje,
The world so clear and bright shines

Złożę ja teraz moje ciężkie brzemie,
I will lay down now my heavy burden

Skrzydła rozwinę, uleczę nad ziemię.
[My] wings I will spread, I will fly up over the earth

Możesz pochować mnie na zachodzie,
You may bury me in the west,

Możesz pochować mnie na wschodzie,
You may bury me in the east,

Ale dźwięk trąby ja usłyszę
But the sound of the trumpet I will hear

Tego poranka.
That morning.

(Miłosz 2005: 128; back-trans. K.J.)

When one examines Miłosz’s sources closely, one will come to the conclusion that the original of the above translation literally does not exist. None of the spirituals (regardless of the version) included in Miłosz’s sources appears to be an adequate basis of this translation; instead, the translation seems to derive from stanzas cited in Johnson’s introduction among examples of various forms of lyricism in the spiritual tradition. The stanzas appear in Johnson’s introduction in the following form:

Sometimes I feel like an eagle in de air
Some-a dese mornin’s bright an’ fair
I’m goin’ to lay down my heavy load ;
Goin’ to spread my wings an’ cleave de air.

[page break]

You may bury me in de east,
You may bury me in de west,

But I'll hear de trumpet sound
In-a dat mornin'.

(Johnson 1925: 41–42)

Misled by the page break, Miłosz probably did not realize that the stanzas that he translated as one spiritual are usually ascribed to two different ones; the first four lines come from a rare version of the spiritual “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child,” while the four lines following the page break are the beginning of “You May Bury Me in de East.” Miłosz’s “mistake,” however, fits in quite well with the character of spirituals. White and White claim that in accordance with the improvisational spirit of this musical tradition, it was quite common to combine stanzas of different spirituals at random: “Lines, couplets, and stanzas in this lyric pool did not belong to one particular song, but floated freely, able potentially to be inserted in many” (2005: 60). White and White compare the processes of creation and performance of spirituals to contemporary musical sampling techniques; the ultimate combination of lines and stanzas depended on the creativity and needs of specific performers. The comparison to sampling can help in the interpretation of “Czasem ja jestem.” Even if Miłosz was not quite aware of combining “samples” of the two spirituals in this “translation,” his choice is nevertheless a creative act because it expresses content that meets the needs of the Polish audience in a specific historical situation.

W.E.B. DuBois called the opening lines of “You May Bury Me in de East” (lines 5 and 6 in Miłosz’s text) “the voice of exile,” a tale of “misty wanderings” when no place on earth can be called home (1994: 158). In the later parts of the song, the image of exile appears in combination with the flight motif, a popular symbol of freedom. In the traditional version of this spiritual, however, the flight motif is placed in the context of the Christian community:

Good ole Christians in dat day
Dey'll take wings an' fly away

(Johnson 1925: 182)

In Miłosz’s text, the image of an eagle in the air, borrowed from another spiritual, gives the song a more secular and individual dimension. Moreover, it is significant that the reference to a triumphant eagle flying through a *bright* and *fair* world appears at the beginning of the song (and it is actually a “world” not “a morning” that appears in Miłosz’s translation).

Thus, what comes to the foreground in “Czasem ja jestem” is a promise of individual freedom; the notion of exile, which is the price for freedom, emerges only as a backdrop. Such a combination of images – of a desire for freedom and of an individual exile – match closely Miłosz’s own experience and the experience of his generation. It brings to mind the poet’s war tribulations and his inner conflicts about emigration, which he was already considering at that time (cf. Miłosz, Gorczyńska 1992: 69; Franaszek 2011: 384).

If we view negro spirituals through the lens of contemporary sampling techniques, we may conclude that the translation “Czasem ja jestem” does not differ much, in terms of “authorship,” from Miłosz’s “own” poem published in *Odrodzenie* a few months before the publication of spirituals in *Nowiny Literackie*:

Pieśń murzyńska

Czerwona rzeka Perry
Czerwona rzeka Perry

*Księżyc nad wodą wschodzi
Księżyc nad wodą wschodzi*

Osypuje się pył bawełny pył na liściach akacjowych drzew ptak
wyśmiewacz gorący zmierzch dnie i noce nie ma dla nas wytchnienia.

Czerwona rzeka Perry

*Śniło mi się, że jak orzeł miałem skrzydła
I wzniosłem się w obszar błękitu
Śniło mi się, że rozpostarłem skrzydła
I leciałem nad wielką równiną*

Księżyc nad wodą wschodzi

Drzewo szeptu drzewo boleści w pyle zmierzchu w pętlicy dróg
w pyle bawełny drzewo przerażenia.

*I zrzuciłem ciężar swój
I głos trąby nawoływał mnie
I wchodziłem nieruchomą stopą
Na złocistą drabinę obłoków
Gwiazdy niebios przywitały mnie*

Czerwona rzeka Perry
Czerwona rzeka Perry

Księżyc nad wodą wschodzi
Księżyc nad wodą wschodzi

(Miłosz 1948b: 7)¹¹

The Negro Song

Red river Perry
Red river Perry

Moon rises over the water
Moon rises over the water

Cotton dust falls dust on the leaves of acacia trees mocking
 bird hot dusk day and night there is no rest for us.

Red river Perry

I dreamed I had wings like an eagle
And I rose into the blue
I dreamed I spread my wings
And I flew over a great prairie

Moon rises over the water

Tree of whisper tree of pain in the dust of dusk in the noose of roads
 in the dust of cotton tree of terror.

And I shook off my heavy burden
And I heard the trumpet call
And I stepped with motionless feet
Onto the golden ladder of clouds
Heavenly stars welcomed me

Red river Perry
Red river Perry

Moon rises over the water
Moon rises over the water

(trans. K.J.)

¹¹ I am citing the poem according to the démenti published in *Odrodzenie* 8/1948. As Miłosz noted, the earlier version published in issue 2 contained errors.

“The Negro Song” clearly shows characteristics of spirituals: it has the same call-and-response structure of repetitions, with some lines representing the voice of the “leader” and some of the responding choir. The poem is also an obvious example of sampling; it is a collection of popular motifs and symbols borrowed from the spirituals that Miłosz translated: an eagle’s flight, a trumpet’s sound, a rising moon, Jacob’s ladder, a heavy load etc. However, this traditional imagery of spirituals also includes elements that are not typical: *acacia*, a rare reference in African American songs (despite its American origins), but a common motif in Polish poetry, and *red river Perry*, which cannot be found on the map of the United States.¹² Of course, all these “inconsistencies” can be ascribed to the poetic license, but they can also be viewed as another proof that negro spirituals provided Miłosz with a lyrical discourse that allowed him to convey subversive political messages. As a composition whose relation to Miłosz as the author is ambivalent, “The Negro Song” is perfect evidence of the “deceit” that the poet tried to perform through his translations. If in the “original” spirituals the lot of Israelites could converge with the lot of black slaves, the transnational *acacia* in “The Negro Song” can also be a sign of the connection between the Polish and African American experiences of oppression. Moreover, the colour of *red river* in the political context of the time can hardly be seen as neutral. When in the first version of “Song on Porcelain” Miłosz used the expression *czerwona farba* [red paint], Tadeusz Kroński reproached him for the problematic political connotations of these words (Miłosz 2007: 352). However, Kroński had no reservations about “The Negro Song” and called the poem “astounding,” even though the *red river* in its refrain can easily be interpreted as a symbol of political power that invokes *pain* and *terror* in the speaker.

It is worth placing Kroński’s reaction in the context of contemporary theoretical debates on the similarities and differences between postcolonial and post-Soviet experiences (cf. Chernetsky, Spivak, Ram 2006; Thompson 2000; Janion 2006). According to David Ghioni Moore, an academic reluctance to link these experiences derives from the discursive line separating “the Orient” from “the West,” which makes Central and Eastern Europeans believe that they are “radically” – that is “racially” – different from the inhabitants of postcolonial countries (Moore 2005: 522). It was

¹² While a tributary of the Mississippi which runs through the former slave states, Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas and Louisiana is called the Red River, none of its sections is called Perry.

probably this discursive line that inspired Kroński to overlook the political undertones of “The Negro Song” and interpret it simply as “a charming example of a poetic vision” (Miłosz 2007: 333, trans. K.J.). Nevertheless, the limits of racial discourse did not bind Miłosz himself. During the post-war period, he transcended them several times, not only in “The Negro Song” and his translations of spirituals. Also in “Traktat moralny” (“A Treaties on Morality”), the only openly political poem that Miłosz managed to publish during that time, the poet bluntly compares the Soviet power in Poland to a colonial situation.¹³ The final lines of the poem call for perseverance, and evoke Joseph Conrad to warn the collective reader against a difficult political future:

Idźmy w pokoju ludzie prości.
Przed nami jest
-- „Jądro ciemności”.

(Miłosz 1953: 97)

Plain folks, let's go in peace
Ahead of us is
-- “Heart of darkness.”

(trans. K.J.)¹⁴

Additionally, Miłosz put emphasis on the transracial kinship of experience when, in the first edition of *Światło dzienne* (published in France), alongside his own poems, he placed five translations from “Negro poetry,” including the spiritual “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” (Miłosz 1953: 70–73).¹⁵ In the introduction to the book, Miłosz explained that, although he had considered using other translations as well, it was the “negro” poems that fit “the composition of the whole collection better than any other ones” (1953: 5; trans. K.J.). Thus, in *Światło dzienne*, the spiritual “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” received the same signature of Miłosz’s authorship as “Traktat moralny” and other poems, which the poet, in his own words, “was not able to publish in Poland” (1953: 5, trans. K. J.). It would be

¹³ Unfortunately, no English translation of this important poem exists.

¹⁴ My interpretation of the poem’s ending is based on the anti-Stalinist reading of “Traktat moralny,” supported by such critics as Aleksander Fiut and Łukasz Tischner (Fiut 2008: 175, 178; Tischner 2008: 190). However, I agree that the poem leaves room for other interpretation, as Henryk Markiewicz notes in his article for *Teksty Drugie* (2006).

¹⁵ The other four translations are poems by Margaret Walker, Luis Palès Matos, K.E. Ingram and Bruce McM. Wright.

difficult to find a better proof of Miłosz's ambivalent attitude towards the notion of "authorship" in translation and of his transracial perception of human experience, two elements that are crucial to the understanding of the politics of his translations of negro spirituals.

Miłosz's ability to transcend racial divisions is manifested also in his choice of language. In the "original" context, the language of negro spirituals, African American Vernacular English, can be viewed as their racial marker. In his introduction, Miłosz explains that "the dialect" of spirituals does not have a Polish equivalent, and he decides to use standard Polish for his translations, with occasional elements of folk style (1948: 4).¹⁶ Perhaps it was the standard Polish of the translations, essentially free from any foreignness, that made the editors of *Nowiny Literackie* read negro spirituals outside of the limits of racial discourse. After all, it is quite possible that despite Iwaszkiewicz's apologies for "an accidental" splitting of the translation sequence, the members of his editorial board did notice that Miłosz's full selection of spirituals contained an accumulation of freedom motifs, which would have been inconvenient for the political authorities. Neither "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" nor any of the three translations analyzed earlier, in which Miłosz's authorship is particularly evident, were published in *Nowiny Literackie*. Despite the potential of "deceit," the game that Miłosz played through his translations did not bring a desired effect. Thus, the translator's "fury" was fully justified: *Nowiny Literackie* may have "killed" his work with premeditation.

trans. Katarzyna Jakubiak

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¹⁶ For example, one characteristic of folk poetry that Miłosz follows is the use of the pronoun *ja* ("I") in lines such as *Czasem ja jestem*. A standard Polish structure would omit the pronoun (*Czasem jestem*) because the grammatical form of the verb "to be," *jestem*, already implies the "I."

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