

ZOFIA BOBOWICZ

## WORKING ON THE FRENCH EDITION OF *ZIEMIA ULRO* (THE LAND OF ULRO)

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The first Polish edition of *The Land of Ulro* appeared in France in Maisons Laffitte in 1977, published by Instytut Literacki. The preface to this edition was written by Father Józef Sadzik, a philosopher specializing in Heidegger, and the director of the Pallotine Centre for Dialogue in Surcouf Street, Paris. Following his advice and encouragement, Miłosz, who had been connected to Father Sadzik through a long-standing friendship and mutual respect, began to translate the biblical texts which Sadzik had scrupulously published in *Editions du Dialogue* (in August 1980 the latter died suddenly of heart failure, holding photocopies of *The Book of Job*, never to witness the Solidarity victory in Gdańsk, nor his friend's receipt of the Noble Prize). In September 1980 in Berkeley Miłosz dedicated a poem to him: "Dla Józefa Sadzika" (For Józef Sadzik):

Jakże tak można, pośrodku rozmowy  
Zniknąć i nawet nie powiedzieć "wróćę"  
I dom od razu mieć wieloechowy  
Skąd żadnej wieści, tylko szum zakłóceń?

How can one disappear mid-conversation  
Without even saying "I'll be right back"  
And move into the multi-echoed house  
Which brings no news, only the hum of static?

(trans. A.M.)

I have kept the typescript of this poem, which I received from Father Zenon Modzelewski, the Deputy Director of the Centre for Dialogue, before its publication.

In his preface to *The Land of Ulro*, Sadzik makes a modest confession:

In September 1976 Czesław Miłosz arrived in Paris. He moved into the flat above mine. (...) I was given the typescript of *The Land of Ulro* to read. Unexpectedly one evening, Czesław launched an attack: You must write the preface to the book. I kept defending myself in an honest way: I am neither a literary critic nor an insightful observer. I said in all sincerity that others would do it better. In the end, however, I relented. When I was seeing Miłosz off at the airport, I made a promise: I will try, my dear dean (trans. A.M.).

I mention this anecdote because I too was “forced” to translate this perhaps most difficult of Miłosz’s books, his personal intellectual diary. I agreed to translate it at the entreaty of Konstanty Jeleński, with whom I was working on the expanded edition of *Antologia poezji polskiej* (The Anthology of Polish Poetry) edited by L’Age d’homme in 1981.

On 26 January 1983 I signed the contract with the Hachette publishers – a real force on the French publishing market (both then and today). It goes without saying that Miłosz’s Nobel Prize made the negotiations much smoother. In April 1983 Hachette received a subvention covering the cost of translation from the French Ministry of Culture (Centre National du Livre). When I started the work, I was a bit horrified at the scope of the author’s interests, which forced me to consult both esoteric magazines and such little known thinkers in France as William Blake or Swedenborg, who are copiously cited by Miłosz. “May the land go easy on you,” Andrzej Wat would mock me when we met at the Pallotine Centre for Dialogue, which was a meeting point for the Polish-Parisian intelligentsia during the politically intense period of the 1980s.

In the meantime, unforeseen complications of a completely different nature had arisen. All of a sudden, Hachette withdrew from the contract after a few months, forcing us to look for a new publisher. Kot Jeleński asked me to help, given my role as editor and director of the series at the influential Robert Laffont publishing house (which, incidentally, politely yet flatly refused to publish *Visions from San Francisco Bay* in the series I edited because they considered the book inaccessible to a wider audience; it was finally published in 1986 by Fayard). I began serious talks with the respectable Berg International, where the director of *L’autre Rive* series, Jean-Pierre Osier, was very enthusiastic about the project, and proposed a great many ideas for the preface and the promotion. This period resulted in correspondence with Czesław Miłosz himself (I handed the letters, along

with all the documents detailing the vicissitudes of the French edition of *The Land of Ulro*, to Agnieszka Kosińska, who tends to the poet's flat and archive in Kraków). We also took the Albin Michel publishing house into account, where my friend Paul Goma, a Romanian writer well known in France, became the literary director of *Les Grandes Traductions* series. In his letter of 6 February 1984, Miłosz opted for Berg International:

Berg seems to me the best solution, and I have sent a telex to Bromberg to this effect. The question of the book's preface is still to be investigated. I think that, although the author of the preface is a nice person, the preface itself isn't good, and Osier could do a better job. It doesn't have to be long. My preface to the English edition is half a page. The English publisher (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux) is preparing the edition for May (trans. A.M.).

I do not remember why I signed the contract with Albin Michel in June 1984. Finances could have played a part (conceivably, Bromberg, Miłosz's agent, influenced his final decision). As for the preface, it will remain a mystery as to whom Miłosz had in mind when writing the letter (perhaps I have forgotten?). I know that I talked about it with Kot Jeleński, who had written an essay on *The Land of Ulro*, but he – modest as always – believed that the text was not suitable for the French reader. Evidently, we must have thought the same about Sadzik's preface to the Polish edition in *Kultura*. Kot gave me Renata Gorczyńska's conversations with Miłosz, *Podróżny Świata* (World Traveller: Conversations with Czesław Miłosz), published under the pseudonym of Ewa Czarnecka by Bicentennial Publishing Corporation (New York, 1983). The fragment pertaining to *The Land of Ulro* was perfect for the French edition; it features as a preface in the Albin Michel edition of March 1985 while its subtitle, *Méditations sur l'espace et la religion*, is borrowed from Gorczyńska.

Translating *The Land of Ulro* gave me an exciting opportunity to travel through the labyrinths of European thought. Miłosz's revelatory interpretations of the history of the Western religious imagination, the hermetic worlds of Blake, Swedenborg and O.W. Miłosz, and of the Polish Romantic writers and Dostoyevsky's works, grew in strength and vitality through the French language, which Miłosz might have had in mind when he wrote: "The Polish language has many virtues, but it is not really suitable for translating philosophical and religious texts, as it lacks both the vocabulary and the rhythmic stability." All in all, it was very difficult for me to find the numerous quotes from Oscar Miłosz, among others, or fragments of works

already translated into French, such as Gershom G. Scholem, Berdyaev, Dostoyevsky, Leszek Kołakowski, Erich Heller, Newton, Gai Eaton – not to mention William Blake. Aleksander Fiut was a great help as he – on Miłosz’s request – sent me exact bibliographical details of all the quotes, whereas Pierre Leyris, an excellent French translator of Blake, was requested by Miłosz to provide assistance, and spared no effort in delivering his translations of *The Book of Thel*, *Jerusalem* or *Milton*, just in time. We exchanged many letters, but we never met. On 20 April 1985 Pierre Leyris – to whom I had sent the French edition (he was familiar with the English edition, which he had received from Miłosz) – wrote to me saying that the book was an excellent read in French and that it had led him to rediscover Mickiewicz and other Polish writers who were, unfortunately, inaccessible to him. This was the last letter he wrote to me. Pierre Leyris died on 4 January 2001, aged 97. The book was published in March 1985. *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* published two generous reviews; afterwards there was silence.

**trans. Agata Maslowska**